**Vibranium Status**

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# Vibranium Status

by jennylarner

Summary

Mr Harrington let the drum roll go on, laughing until the teenagers started to yell again, “Okay! Okay! Boys and girls, girls and boys… we have been invited on an exclusive tour of the one, the only, STARK INDUSTRIES!”

Peter wasn’t sure if he was going to faint, throw up, or cease existing entirely.

He knew he was hoping for the latter.

...

Peter hasn't spoken to Tony in two months - not since their argument. It had been stupid really, and looking back Peter wasn't sure if he could even pinpoint what started it, but he hadn't been back to the Tower since. He had been too ashamed of his behaviour to face Tony, and had no intentions to return. But then, his class field trip is announced - to Stark Industries.

Peter is determined to keep his head down, swallow his hurt at the genius' rejection, and get through this trip as smoothly and painlessly as possible.

Tony isn't interested in seeing him anyway.

Right?

# Chapter 1

When Mr Harrington had announced a surprise field trip for the following Friday, Peter hadn't thought anything of it.

When the permission slips had been passed around, Peter *still* hadn't thought anything of it.

When Mr Harrington giddily declared the class wouldn't find out where they were going until the morning of the trip, Peter had *refused* to think anything of it.

When the entirety of homeroom was spent reading the vague legal terms within an eighteen-page NDA, with Mr Harrington looming over each of them to ensure they understand every single letter… well, Peter had thought a little bit about it.

The field trip could be to anywhere. Midtown was invited to tour high-brow STEM companies all the time, places eager to impress the next generation of scientists already forming their ten-years career plans and deciding where they'd work after college.

The field trip could be to anywhere that is, except for Stark Industries, because Stark Industries did not offer school tours. Never had, never would, and for this Peter was eternally grateful.

Eight weeks ago, he would have been thrilled at the chance to show off his knowledge of Avengers Tower. He might have even asked Tony if there was any way for his class to be granted a one-off tour, filled with pride at his internship with the one and only Iron Man. He would have imagined skipping through the doors explaining how many floors there were and what kinds of labs were on each and what the best food in the cafeteria was.

Now he was just grateful that Stark Industries was never going to be the site of a Midtown field trip.

He didn't want to go near the Tower at all, never mind with his classmates.

Not since their argument.

It had been stupid, and childish, and Peter yelled something dumb and then he had stormed out with tears stinging in his eyes. Tony had yelled something rude at his back as he went, something along the lines of, "don't let the door hit you on the way out" but with much coarser language. Peter hadn't even reached the elevator by the time ACDC began blasting at full volume, the quietude of their afternoon lab time well and truly vanquished by the beats of Highway to Hell.

Peter hadn't been back to the Tower since.

He wasn't angry anymore. Their argument had been stupid, really, and looking back Peter wasn't sure if he could even pinpoint what started it. It had seemed so important at the time.

A disagreement over Spiderman. Something about the technology in his suit, developing into a time-worn argument about tracking and privacy and trust.

And all after Tony had been so good to him, let him into his Tower, his lab, his *life.*

Peter couldn't stand to face Tony after his behaviour. Couldn't stomach the thought of swinging his way across the New York skyline and sheepishly knocking on the windows, asking to be let in. The guilt was wrapped around his heart like one of Iron Man's armored gauntlets, unbending and unbreakable.

If he was honest though, he was hurt more than guilt-ridden.

He was hurt at what Tony had said, he was hurt that Tony had let him leave the Tower so upset, and, more than anything, he was hurt that Tony had not reached out since. He had waited anxiously those first few days after their fight, sure that Tony would send a text. Something short and preferably irrelevant so that Peter could walk into their Friday lab session that week and they'd both pretend nothing had happened.

But no text came. No call. Not even an email.

When the Friday had come around, Peter had gotten on the subway and headed to the Tower anyway, loitering on the benches across the street. His hands had been sweatily wrapped around his phone, feet bouncing against the sidewalk, waiting for a telltale buzz. Tony hated when Peter was late for their lab time. Peter was sure, *sure,* that by five-fifteen he'd receive a text, something like 'move it, you're late', or 'hurry it up underoos, we've got work to do'. With that, he would know that Tony still wanted him there, and he'd rush across the street, up the escalators and into the lab, breathlessly apologise for his tardiness, and ask what they were working on.

Everything would be fine.

Peter had waited on the benches until eight o'clock.

When the sun had set, he'd headed home, heart sunk so low pedestrians were probably trodding on it as he shoved past them, wiping at his face as he stepped onto the subway.

Nothing was fine.

But at least he was going on a field trip, and the sting of Tony's rejection had lessened a tiny amount as the weeks had passed by. He'd handed in his signed permission slip and NDA and arrived at the school early on the day as instructed. He'd dutifully climbed onto the bus alongside his classmates, wishing the whole time that no monsters or aliens or radioactive spiders would show up and this could be a calm, quiet day.

Mr Harrington swiftly ruined that dream.

"Okay class," the teacher was practically skipping in place. Peter was slightly worried his teacher was going to fall down the tiny staircase leading to the bus's exit. At least if he did,

the closed doors would catch him. “I am finally able to tell you where we are headed for the day!”

A great cheer rose up. Flash and his followers hooted and hollered from the back of the bus. Abe had a notebook out, whispering, ‘please be somewhere great, please be somewhere great, please don’t be Oscorp again’. Ned, sat beside Peter and only three rows in front of Mr Harrington, slapped his hands on his thighs to intimidate a drum roll. Shockingly, it caught on. Peter joined in, laughing at Ned’s antics and MJ’s pursed lips on the seats across from them.

Mr Harrington let the drum roll go on, laughing too until the teenagers started to yell again, “Okay! Okay! Boys and girls, girls and boys… we have been invited on an exclusive tour of the one, the only, STARK INDUSTRIES!”

The screaming was immediate. So many people jumped to their feet that the bus seemed to shake, and then sway as students grabbed their seatmates and rushed across the aisle to grab at their friends, throwing themselves against the windows and their seats in their excitement. Flash, who of course had his phone out in the back, let out some kind of war cry that on any other day Peter might have been able to make out. MJ sat still. Ned let out the loudest noise Peter had ever heard from his friend, but abruptly cut off when he saw Peter’s face.

Peter wasn’t sure if he was going to faint, throw up, or cease existing entirely.

He knew he was hoping for the latter.

“No, no, no, no, no,” he whispered, panic rising rapidly in chest, “No, no, no, no.”

Ned sunk back into his seat, placing a placating hand on Peter’s arm, “Peter, it’s gonna be fine, it’s not like we’re gonna see Mr Stark –” At the front of the bus, Mr Harrington was beaming ear to ear, even as he frantically waved his hands and tried to settle the students. “We’ll just be seeing the low-level stuff, right, they’re never gonna let a bunch of teenagers into Mr Stark’s labs.”

Peter did not feel fine. If he had his suit on, he was entirely sure that Karen would be reporting his pounding heart rate and quick breaths and be recommending medical attention. Was he having a panic attack? He didn’t want to go to the Tower. What if Tony was alerted that he was there? Had his access been revoked? Would he even be allowed in?

Mr Harrington’s yell broke his train of thought. “I know you’re all excited but if you don’t sit down and get your seatbelts on, we won’t going anywhere!” There was a mad scuffling as every student scrambled back to their seat, and the wild clicking of seatbelts. The bus pulled away from the school and into traffic, and Mr Harrington remained where he stood to continue speaking. “This trip is, of course, an exceptional honour. I am sure you all know that Stark Industries does not typically provide field trip opportunities. To my knowledge, we will be the first allowed such a privilege.”

There was more excited chatter. Squeals of ‘oh my god, oh my god’. A sob?

Peter put his head in his hands. Surely this couldn't be a coincidence. That his class, out of every school that had ever reached out to Stark Industries for a tour, would be selected… wait, hadn't Mr Harrington said…

MJ thrust a hand in the air, "Mr Harrington, why was Midtown Tech invited for this tour? If Stark Industries doesn't allow school field trips, isn't it suspicious that we were *invited*?"

There was a general hum of agreement, tinted with hesitation at MJ's observation. Mr Harrington was not deterred. Impossibly, his smile grew. The other teacher accompanying them, Mr Warren, grinned right at Peter and Ned. "I was told, by the administration at Stark Industries, that several of their lead scientists have high school aged children and were in the audience when our decathlon team won Nationals. They were exceptionally impressed. You can all thank MJ, Peter, Ned, Abe, Jason, Cindy and Betty for this incredible opportunity!"

The coach raised an even louder cheer, and Peter and Ned's seats shook as their classmates leaned over to clap them on the shoulders, hollering the whole time. Despite himself, Peter felt a sheepish smile creep across his lips. They had never been popular, never been so much as 'well-liked' by their peers… but securing their class a trip to Stark Industries? They'd go down as legends.

Ned beamed, "My dad is gonna be so proud!" His best friend whispered.

Peter stood a little and peered back. Betty was bright red, almost in tears as her girlfriends grabbed her hands and raised her arms in celebration. Abe was likewise surrounded, a friend either side grabbing onto his shoulders to pull him left then right then left. Peter was glad to see Abe was laughing along. Cindy had her head in her hands. She might have been crying.

Flash, on the other hand, as the decathlon alternate and having taken no part in Nationals (all the team members having been well for the final), appeared downright aggravated. His arms crossed across his chest; Peter could see the other boy mouthing something that seemed a lot like 'duck off' to his seatmate.

Now *that* was enough to make Peter grin.

"You're right Ned," He sighed, sinking down and feeling the relief spread through his chest. Ned looked at him expectingly. "It's not like we're gonna see Mr Stark, and if this is to do with decathlon, he won't even know we're coming. Neither he nor Pepper handle this kind of thing. It's gonna be fine."

Ned punched him on the shoulder, "That's what I'm taking about!"

There was a needle of doubt in Peter's chest, but he ignored the sensation as Ned began to talk 'strategy' and the bus continued through downtown traffic. He loved the Tower. He did. He only hadn't wanted to go these past months because of the fight with Tony. Now, he got to go to the place he loved, without seeing the mentor who hurt him.

It was a win-win situation. Right?

…

Tony was moping. There was no other word for it.

His lab was an absolute *mess.* Gadgets, gizmos, torn up technology that had been dismantled until no longer recognizable - all strewn about the worktables. Some of the piles had grown so high they'd toppled and started littering the floor. That wasn't even mentioning the oil stains and the food cartons and the faint smell of soot.

Pepper stared at it all with her lip curled.

In the middle of the mess, was the genius himself. He hadn't noticed when Pepper had walked into the lab. Hadn't noticed her minutes later as she stood surveying a pile of springs and what looked like… burnt wash clothes? She honestly couldn't tell. She hoped it wasn't the sweater she'd brought Tony for Christmas, but it did seem a very similar colour…

She sighed, resigned. "Tony."

"Hm."

"*Tony.*"

"Yes, Pepper?" Tony sounded resigned too.

"You're moping again."

"Don't have the faintest clue what you mean Pep. I'm *working*. Creating. Inventing. I'm actually very busy so if you don't mind – *OW.*" Tony turned fast enough his wooden stool spun with him, his eyes blown wide with outrage. He peered around until his gaze fell upon the small spring Pepper had lobbed straight at his back. Her aim had been high, and she'd gotten the back of his head instead, but she wasn't complaining. "Dearest darling fiancé of mine, that could be classed as spousal abuse."

"Subjecting me to the smell of this lab could also fall under the classification." Pepper wrinkled her nose at the day's old pizza box across from her soon-to-be-husband. "You've got to clean up in here Tony."

Tony waved a hand, "Occupation hazard of being *in the zone*."

"If you say so," Pepper said, suppressing a huff, "I just wanted to check on you, I suppose I will leave you to your *zone*. I'll even make your excuses at the board meeting this morning." Tony's lips ticked upwards, but he schooled it quickly and mocked a bow, swinging around to turn his back, "If," The MIT-educated billionaire winced at the word. "If you absolutely promise not to miss the meeting scheduled for three o'clock this afternoon – it's an Avengers meeting, Tony, and it's important. Do you promise?"

"Anything to get out of a board meeting Pep," Tony conceded, "See you at three?"

“Auditorium, thirtieth floor,” Pepper said, “Three o’clock. Don’t be late or so help me God, Tony, I will force you to every board meeting for the next ten months.”

Tony nodded absentmindedly, returning to his work.

He put up a good front, Pepper thought as she left, good enough to fool most people he interacted with daily - but Pepper knew him too well. He wasn’t his usual self. Not snarky enough, not animated enough.

*Mopey*.

Tony was missing a piece of himself.

…

Mr Harrington had remained animated and excited throughout the bus journey to Stark Industries. It had lessened as they’d pulled up to Avengers Tower and he, along with Mr Warren, had needed to herd twenty-five wound up teenagers through the lobby. Now, standing opposite an unimpressed receptionist and three scowling security guards, Mr Harrington had wilted like a flower in a heatwave.

“We were invited, you see,” He stammered again, and Peter couldn’t help but feel bad for him. The receptionist barely looked up from her monitor. “Midtown Tech? We’re a STEM school in Queens. We submitted all the paperwork –”

“Give me a moment please, Mr Harrington.” The receptionist – Peter peered around his classmates and saw her name tag, Josie Mulligan – held up a hand. Peter didn’t recognise her. There were a few tense seconds. The students looked between one another, half convinced this was all a prank and all their hopes and dreams were about to come crashing down with a defeated trek back onto the bus. Then – “Yes, here we are.”

Mr Harrington let out the longest breath Peter had ever heard. So did a few students. “Oh, thank God.”

“Midtown School and Science and Technology, personal invite for twenty-five members of the sophomore class accompanied by one Mr Harrington and one Mr Warren, to attend the Tower for a field trip.” Josie relaxed slightly, “I apologise, Mr Harrington. You must understand, Stark Industries does not offer school trips, so some additionally security measures are required.”

“Of course, of course.” Mr Harrington’s knees were still shaking. Peter pressed his lips together when Ned pointed this out.

“You will all need to go through the security scanners individually, and then you’ll attend a mandatory security briefing with a member of our team before the tour begins.” Josie said. Before she could wave them on, one of the security guards leaned down to whisper

something in her ear. Josie stared at her monitor with a furrowed brow, then shuffled the paperwork beside her desk. “Oh... yes, I see. Yes, it’s listed here in red. How curious.”

“Red?” Mr Harrington squeaked. “Curious?”

Josie stood up straight and really surveyed them for the first time. “This… this is a sophomore class, correct? Fifteen- and sixteen-year-old students?” She clarified, looking back down at her notes.

“That’s correct,” Peter was sure there was sweat dribbling down the back of Mr Harrington’s neck. “Is there a problem? Are they too young to access certain areas of the Tower? Is it a safety issue? Because whatever you’ll allow, we would be so grateful –”

“No,” Josie interrupted him. “It isn’t that. It’s only…”

“Yes?” Mr Warren prompted, when Mr Harrington opened his mouth and words failed to come out.

“One of your students is listed as a Stark Industries employee.”

*Shit. Shit, shit, shit –*

Slowly, each of his classmates turned on their heels to face Peter, all with identical incredulous expressions. Ned tried to push him forwards, but Peter’s feet were stuck to the spot. He was quite sure his heart had stopped beating. He couldn’t hear it. Why couldn’t he hear it? Could he usually hear it?

Josie raised an eyebrow at him, “Are you Peter Parker?”

Peter cringed but managed a nod.

*Okay. His access hadn’t been revoked then. Tony must have forgotten.*

Mr Harrington stared at him. Mr Warren’s mouth had dropped open.

“And what position exactly do you hold at Stark Industries?”

“Uh,” Peter said. *Shit, what if this alerted Mr Stark he was in the Tower?* “I’m an intern, Ms Mulligan.”

“In what department?”

Flash may have been having an aneurysm at the back of the crowd. Peter could hear the gritting of his teeth. Why could he hear Flash’s teeth but not his own heart beating?

“I’m, uh, well – oh here,” Peter clumsily slipped his school bag off his shoulder and dug in the pockets, fingers catching on a sharp plastic edge.

It was Friday after all. He always had his ID on Fridays… just in case.

Shuffling his way through the crowd, he handed the lanyard to Josie, red spots high on his cheeks.

“Perfect, just what I needed. Thank you, Mr –” Josie cut off, staring at the information on the plastic rectangle attached to Peter’s lanyard. Her eyes slid, ever so deliberately, up to his face. The security guards glanced over her shoulder. One sucked in a quick breath. Peter looked down at the counter, his cheeks burning. He bounced ever so slightly on the balls of his feet.

“Is… is there a problem with Peter’s pass?” Mr Warren asked tentatively, “Will he require a different one for the tour?”

Josie’s eyes shot back to the teachers. “No, of course not.” She said sharply, then softened her tone as she spoke to Peter. “Mr Parker, I can only apologise for the confusion.” She slid the lanyard back to him. Cheeks burning, Peter hung it around his neck and tucked it underneath his hoodie. “Please keep this on your person for the tour, and when the security guard in charge of your debrief hands guest passes to your classmates please inform him that you are already in possession of an employee pass. Our notes instruct that under no circumstances should your ID card be replicated, so they will not have one for you. Any problems, please let me know and I will ensure it is dealt with.”

“I will, thank you Ms Mulligan.” Peter forced a smile. His heart, far from having stopped beating, was hammering against his chest. He stepped back and avoided the gawks and gapes of twenty-two teenagers (MJ was smirking, Ned was sniggering). His hands brushed his jeans as they twitched.

Josie motioned towards the security scanners. “One at a time, please. The same rules as the airport. Shoes off, bags in trays, electronics and liquids and food must be taken out.”

Mr Warren went first, and the class filed in after, whispering all the way. Peter tried to keep his head down. It was still hard to breathe.

*Would Tony be annoyed at him for coming to the Tower? Would he come and ask Peter directly if his childish tantrum was over yet? Fuck, would he get kicked out in front of all his classmates?*

“Peter.” Mr Harrington was tapping him on the shoulder.

Peter startled, coming to attention. Mr Harrington gestured to his backpack, waiting to be collected. He’d made it through the security line on sheer muscle memory, though he’d barely ever used the front entrance. He hurriedly stuffed his shoes back on and slung his backpack over his shoulder.

“We’re very proud of you, Peter, I hope you know that.” His teacher said suddenly.

Warmth flooded back into Peter’s face at the praise. “Thank you, Mr Harrington.” He mumbled; face downcast.

“An internship at Stark Industries is a remarkable feat.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Especially at your age. Their minimum requirement has always been two years of an undergraduate.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Mr Harrington clapped him on the shoulder. Everyone was being led into the security debrief and Mr Harrington steered Peter in the same direction. Ned was waiting for him, falling into step. Abe and Charles were peeking over their shoulders at him. Flash was walking with his hands clenched into fists.

“An SI internship at fifteen… now that’s going to get you into MIT no problem. You might be the youngest employee SI has ever had.” Mr Harrington continued cheerily. All of his previous hesitation had leeched away, his enthusiasm returned in full force.

*Too bad I went and ruined it.* Peter thought miserably, and followed Ned into the debrief.

# Chapter 2

Security briefing complete, and every student bar Peter had a white piece of plastic around their neck with 'GUEST' in big, black letters.

As they were led to the barriers, where they would swipe said cards to gain official entry into the Tower, Peter could only hope Tony hadn't set up his ID card like he had KAREN – to inform him of Peter's movements. If he used his ID in the Tower, would FRIDAY automatically alert Tony of it? He'd never asked. He probably should have asked. Why hadn't he asked?

"Michelle Jones. Guest." FRIDAY announced, and the glass barriers slid apart to allow MJ to pass.

Flash strode up next, swiping his ID card with a flourish. He'd clearly recovered his ego during the security briefing.

"Eugene Thompson. Guest." FRIDAY announced, but… was it Peter, or was her voice more monotone than with MJ? And he could have sworn the barriers opened slower, as if reluctant.

"Roger Harrington. Guest."

"Betty Brant. Guest."

"Jason Ionello. Guest."

"Edward Leeds. Guest."

With his classmates watching closely, Peter stepped forwards. The barriers snapped apart before he had the chance to remove his ID card from beneath his hoodie.

"Peter Parker. Underoos. Research and Development Intern. Vibranium status. Welcome back Peter." FRIDAY said, and this time Peter *knew* her voice had warmed.

Peter's mouth popped open in shock. At least he hadn't been denied entry, and clearly, he hadn't been wiped from FRIDAY's server. And he was still recognized as an intern. But being called Underoos? Tony's nickname for him? And what was vibranium status?

He walked through, dazed. "Uh, thanks FRI."

"But –" Flash sputtered, outraged, as Peter joined Ned. The decathlon alternate looked as though someone had slapped him. Underneath all his questions about Tony, Peter felt a prickle of satisfaction in his chest. "You didn't even scan your ID! The barriers just opened for you!"

"FRIDAY just… knows who I am, Flash." Peter said, a little embarrassed but with truly no more information to offer.

Before Flash imploded or threw the kind of tantrum mothers hoped to avoid in the middle of a supermarket aisle, a beaming intern stepped into the fray, “Hey there! You must be Midtown Tech! I’m Reagen, and I’m going to be showing you around. First stop – the Avengers Museum!”

…

“Boss, Peter Parker has just entered the Tower.”

Tony jolted so dramatically he dropped the hammer he was using directly onto his foot, “*Shit!* Fuck, *ow –”* He yelped, bending to scoop up the tool and knocking over a pile of springs in the process. He abandoned the hammer on the workbench. “Repeat that would you?”

“Peter Parker has just entered the Tower. As per your amendments to the Baby Monitor Protocol I am to alert you when Peter enters the Tower, whether as a civilian or as Spiderman.”

Tony turned in a circle, hopping on one foot, scanning the room to find a clock. “It’s only ten.” Tony’s heart stuttered. “Is… is he coming up? It’s a Friday, right? He’s here for lab time? What about school?”

FRIDAY’s synthetic voice was sympathetic. “No, Boss. Peter is here for a field trip with his classmates. They are currently on their way to the Avengers Museum.”

Tony’s mood plummeted immediately. Annoyance and hurt and anger and guilt pressed in on all sides, shrinking his view to tunnel vision, laser focused on the mess littered before him.

The kid had come to his Tower and hadn’t even let him know.

He gritted his teeth. “Fine.” He bit out, turning back to his work, shoulders hunching. “Keep track of the k- of him. If he starts heading up here or anything let me know.”

“It sounds as if you wish to see him.” Outside the doors of the laboratory, the elevator dinged. “His class have arrived at the Avengers Museum on the fifth floor, if you would like to join them?”

“Did you seriously just call the elevator for me? How presumptuous.”

“It is part of my programming to anticipate your needs.”

“Is it in your programming to *sass* me?”

“Yes. That was part of update two zero seven.”

Tony grumbled, picking up some screws and twirling them between his fingers. “It’s not like the kid wants to see me. After –” He cut off with a cringe, tossing the screw back onto the

ever-growing pile. “You know. How I behaved.”

“To paraphrase Ms Potts, perhaps Peter would appreciate an apology?” FRIDAY suggested, a hopeful lilt to her Irish twang. “According to thirteen million eight hundred and thirty-four sources online, an apology is the first step in resolving any form of conflict between friends, family, parents and their children, spouses –”

“Alright, alright, I get it.” Tony shoved down the prickling sensation in his throat, a climbing emotion he refused to name, and picked the drill back up. “He’s on a field trip. He’s with his classmates.” He said tempestuously, massaging the tightness in his chest with his other hand. “I shouldn’t interrupt. I’ll… He doesn’t want to see me anyway. He hasn’t been here in months.”

“Perhaps if you tried –”

“FRIDAY, we have work to do. Crank it up. Loud enough for Pepper to hear it down on eighty-seventh.”

FRIDAY did as she was told.

…

The Avenger’s Museum was filled with memorabilia, and despite the enormous displays of various Iron Man suits and props Peter’s mind was quickly distracted from thoughts of the man himself. Even Ned, Iron Man’s second biggest fan, developed a sudden aversion to the colours red and gold. Instead, he dragged Peter from displays of Captain America to the Falcon to Black Widow to Hulk, oohing and aahing over the statistics of their fights and capabilities.

MJ followed, uninterested to the point of sulking yet mercifully uncomplaining. After all, there was no display of Pepper Potts. “There should be.” MJ muttered. Peter opened his mouth to say he’d suggest it to Tony, then snapped it shut.

Peter’s interest really piqued when Reagan herded them back into the service elevator (the only elevator in the building that would hold all of them at once, as the whole group needed to be under the constant supervision of a Stark Industries employee – though judging by the look on Mr Harrington’s face, he had almost offered Peter for this task).

“We’re going to the research and development labs!” Reagon said excitedly, spreading his arms wide and knocking three students on the head accidently. “It’s the first of three department’s you will be visiting today, and you’ll be able to speak with the head or deputy-head of each. I don’t know how you managed it Midtown, but you’ve really got the VIP experience.”

As the elevator stopped and they funnelled out, Flash turned to Peter with a sneer, “Is that *your* department, wonderboy? Why don’t you just take over the tour yourself?”

Reagen looked at Peter, either missing or choosing to ignore the blatant jealousy in Flash’s voice, “Ah yes, they let me know one of the group was an intern. That’s mighty impressive at fifteen. Who’s your supervisor?”

“Do you work in R&D?” Peter asked, avoiding the question, even though he was glad for the diversion from Flash’s taunt.

“Nah, I’m a research intern for the legal team, up on the sixty-eighth floor. The HR team is in-between intern cohorts which is why you guys have me instead.” Reagen swiped his ID card at the doors and frowned as they flashed red. “That’s odd.” He tried again. The doors flashed a bright, pulsing, negative red. “This is definitely the right place.” He gave a fleeting look left. “Right, Peter? Dr Kobayashi’s labs?”

Luckily, Tony had introduced Peter to Dr Takeshis Kobayashi when he’d first been ‘hired’ as an ‘intern’, as Peter was technically joining the R&D team and Dr Kobayashi was head of the department. Peter liked him and knew that as department head the man was extremely well liked. If Tony ever needed extra materials or tools, Dr Kobayashi’s lab was always the one Peter was sent to.

Peter nodded in agreement. It only made Reagen frown more, trying his card once last time and turning to the group in apology when the doors remained firmly shut, illuminated in the universal colour of ‘*not going to happen*’.

“I am so sorry guys, if you just give me a minute, I’ll call security and have my card –”

“Can’t Peter use his card?” Betty interjected sweetly. If not for the NDA, Peter would have worried her phone was hidden beneath her jacket, set to record everything they were seeing and doing. “Since this is his department?”

Reagen hesitated, “Well, I suppose, if you have access… if wouldn’t mind, Peter? Dr Kobayashi is expecting us after all…”

Peter hesitated too, “I can try.”

*If this doesn’t work it’s going to be super embarrassing.*

Finding himself once again under the watchful of his classmates made Peter’s skin prickle. He fished his ID card out of his hoodie and leaned down to swipe it against the scanners. Immediately, the doors flashed bright green, sliding seamlessly apart with a *whoosh* of cold air. Impressed mutters rippled amongst the crowd.

Peter exhaled a relieved sigh, and turned to Reagen, “I’ll, uh, just go in and confirm with Dr Kobayashi before everyone walks in.”

Flash scoffed but Reagen bobbed his head, “Of course,” He said seriously, “I don’t want you to get into any trouble for using your ID card out of bounds or on behalf of your classmates.”

Peter ducked into the lab.

Dr Kobayashi's lab was one of his favourite places. Spanning half a floor of the Tower and the largest lab aside from Tony's, it was messy and meticulously tidy all at once. Everything was where it was meant to be – even if that meant paperwork precariously balanced on top of machinery or underneath fragrant vials of sparkling violet liquids.

It was bustling with activity too. Several interns Peter knew stood at stations; researchers were entering data into laptops. He could hear noise around the corners. Computers were humming. Machines were whirring. Two people were arguing about the proper way to dispose of potentially, *potentially,* nuclear-level reactive waste. The lab doors had remained open, and his classmates peered in a little (held back from coming further by Reagen's stern glare) just as three interns popped their heads up to simultaneously exclaim, "Peter!"

Peter could hear Flash's teeth again.

"Hi," Peter said, feeling his spine loosen. Anxiety leeched from his body and dissipated in the clean air, as if the mere act of walking through those doors had cleansed his very soul. He stood up straighter.

God, he really missed coming to the Tower. It was his happy place, his *safe* place. The one place apart from his tiny apartment with May where he could come and truly be himself.

"Is Dr Kobayashi here? There's a tour, it's actually my high school class. Reagen said he was expecting –"

Dr Kobayashi turned the corner, stumbling. He had his nose in a scientific journal and was balancing two rapidly slipping boxes on one hip. Peter cleared his throat. The head of R&D looked up, dazed, but when his gaze cleared, he beamed. "Peter! What a pleasant surprise. You haven't been by in a while. Or, you might have, but I haven't seen you. I've missed your visits."

Flash's teeth were in danger of becoming little more than dust by the end of the day.

"Sorry about that Dr Kobayashi." Peter said, sheepishly touched by the kind welcome, "I actually just came to confirm, you are expecting a high school class for a tour? The guide's ID card wasn't working on the doors. I used mine but I wanted to check with you before I let them run wild in your lab."

Dr Kobayashi grinned. "Much appreciated Pete. Yes, I am expecting them." He waved them inside, "Come in, come in! Please don't touch anything. Come stand in front of these benches. Peter, what was the name of the tour guide?"

"Reagen. He's an intern for legal." Reagen came in and shook Dr Kobayashi's hand.

Meanwhile, Peter couldn't help but stand back and enjoy the reactions playing out on his friend's faces. Ned's mouth hung open. Members of their decathlon team were looking around with awe, hardly believing their luck. *Can you believe this place,* he heard Cindy

whisper. Abe was concerningly close to a vial of violet liquid. Even MJ seemed impressed, eying up the equipment laid out on the workbenches.

For a bunch of science-obsessed teenager's, this place was heaven.

"Okay!" Dr Kobayashi clapped his hands together, having put down his journal and his boxes when greeting Reagen. "Welcome everyone, it's nice to –" He stopped, glancing at Peter, who had joined his peers and was listening with rapt attention. "Sorry Peter, are you staying? Or did you need something for Dr Stark?"

It was as if all air was sucked from the room in one clean, cold swipe.

Peter winced, avoiding Mr Harrington and Mr Warren's stunned faces and the gaping silence from everyone else in the room. "Uh, no, sorry, Dr Kobayashi. This is actually my, you know… class. From school. We're on a field trip. *I'm* on the field trip. This trip. This tour."

"Oh!" Dr Kobayashi, having no idea he'd just exposed the one thing Peter had been trying to hide from his classmates, only beamed wider. "Well, no wonder they're receiving this VIP experience." He turned to Peter's teachers with a laugh. "Everyone here at Stark Industries loves Peter."

Peter blushed.

"Is that so?" Mr Warren looked at Peter.

"Oh yes," Dr Kobayashi said, oblivious. "He's very intelligent, very helpful, very hard-working. Always willing to chip in. Constantly encouraging others. He's a credit to your school. We feel very lucky to have him. That is, when we manage to steal him away from his more important duties." Dr Kobayashi winked at Peter.

"Well, how wonderful to hear." Mr Warren said warmly. "Peter is one of our brightest students. We're very happy to see him excelling."

Peter was crimson, the colour staining his skin like dye.

Mr Harrington was beaming so widely; he looked like a comic-book villain.

Flash may have cracked a tooth.

..

It took two-hours' worth of frustrated snarls, and eight ragged cuts through the pads of his fingers, before Tony begrudgingly admitted defeat and accepted that he was too distracted to continue the mind-numbing task he'd assigned himself. He threw the screws down and they bounced and bounded off the worktable, scattering out of sight.

“FRIDAY, where is Peter now?”

“Peter is currently in the robotics labs, engaging in a competition with his classmates.” FRIDAY answered promptly, as if she had just been *waiting* to be asked that very question, holding it on the tip of her non-existent tongue. On Tony’s right, the elevator dinged, the doors sliding open in invitation once more. “Would you like to join them?”

“*No*, FRIDAY.” Tony paused, then asked, as casually as he could manage, “What’s the competition?”, pairing it with a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders, as if he had no real interest in what his ex-intern was doing, no more than twenty or thirty floors below Tony’s own feet.

“To build a small robot capable of movement, with only the materials supplied by Dr Jacobs. Peter is paired with Edward Leeds and Michelle Jones.”

Tony nodded, running an oily hand through his unkempt hair – he needed to shower before the meeting this afternoon, lest he become subject to another of Steve’s lectures on hygiene. About to push his chair back, he raised a brow when the overhead music dimmed, and one of the screens above his workstation began to play footage clearly taken in a Stark Industries laboratory.

“I didn’t ask for –” He began, annoyed, but the footage’s noise doubled in volume, cutting him off. The bar on the screen filled with colour to indicate the higher setting.

Tony huffed. He opened his mouth to argue with FRIDAY, but his gaze could not help but catch on a mop of dark brown hair (longer than the last time Tony had seen him), and a t-shirt with a ridiculous science pun emblazoned in red across the chest.

*Peter.*

Tony’s chest constricted beneath the arc reactor.

Was… Did Peter look older? It had only been two months, but he seemed older. Was Tony imagining it? How fast did teenagers grow? Tony found himself examining every inch of the boy’s young face, inspecting him for change.

Peter was sitting between those two friends of his, a mess of wires in his hands, his lips pulled downward in an expression Tony recognized all too well – concentration to the point of blacking out all other noise and activity around him, as he unlaced the tangle with deft precision.

Tony could practically hear the gears shifting in the teenager’s head. He found himself leaning forward, his focus trained on the screen and the mentee he hadn’t seen hide nor hair in almost two months. He propped his chin on his hands, settling back into his seat.

“I’ll… just see… how they do…” He muttered distractedly, his mind filtering through the seventeen different reasons Peter may be looking so closely at a particular black wire in his hands.

FRIDAY did not respond, but deep in the depths of the Tower's server, her operating systems whirred with the closest approximation to smug satisfaction she could muster.

# Chapter 3

“It’s bullshit. They had such an unfair advantage.”

Peter tuned out the sullen mumbles of Flash being, as ever, a sore loser in the backrow. He accepted his prize from Dr Jacobs (a $20 gift card to the Stark Industries giftshop located on the first floor) as the rest of his classmates clapped politely in resigned congratulations. Mr Harrington was patting Ned on the back, and Mr Warren was loudly promising the whole class would visit the gift shop before reboarding the bus to Midtown that afternoon.

“Good job Peter. I knew your team was bound to win.” Dr Jacobs winked at him, pressing the card against his palm. “The others didn’t stand a chance with you here.”

“Thanks Dr Jacobs. It was a great practical, everyone really enjoyed it.”

Peter knew the deputy-head-of-robotics had a reputation for being a little socially awkward, so he had been surprised to learn the man had *volunteered* to host a practical for the tour group, putting himself under the eagle-eyed attention of twenty-five high school students. But Dr Jacobs was also one of the kindest men Peter had met whilst at Stark Industries and he’d taken their enthusiasm and ran with it, becoming more confident as the morning had worn on.

“Thank you, Peter, I hope so.” Dr Jacobs beamed with pride, looking rather relieved. “Feel free to come by anytime. You’re always welcome.”

“That’d be great. See you around.” Peter said with a small smile, ignoring the prickle in his chest at the half-lie and waving goodbye as he rejoined Ned in the bottlenecked crowd ambling out of the labs, his classmates chorusing their reverent thanks to Dr Jacobs as Reagen led them out of the doors.

Trudging back towards the elevators, Peter turned the gift card over in his hands, then held it out to MJ, “Here, you two share it.” He said, suddenly anxious to be rid of it. “Doesn’t really seem fair for me to get it.”

MJ cautiously slipped the card from Peter’s outstretched hand and into her pocket. “Sure?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a bunch of their stuff anyway.” They shuffled into the service elevator behind their classmates, crowding close so they could all squeeze in. “I definitely don’t need anything else from here.”

Ned and MJ shared a quick glance. Peter pretended not to see the apprehension scrunching their brows, absentmindedly tapping his fingers against the cold, steel handrail encasing the elevator.

A few weeks into the formal creation of his ‘internship’, Peter had asked Tony if he could visit the gift shop, practically giddy since finding out that as an official employee of the company, he was entitled to a seventy-five per cent discount on all Stark Industries’ products and merchandise.

Tony had sighed dramatically and pretended to be annoyed at the request, rolling his eyes with such exaggeration Peter was surprised they didn't roll right out of their sockets. But, Tony had also rather insistently accompanied Peter along. When Peter had picked out half the store, including a Stark Industries hoodie in four different colours, four matching t-shirts, and a thermos with an arc-reactor print, Tony had snorted with amusement and waved at the clerk, having everything Peter had displayed even the slightest bit of interest in packed up, free of charge.

The memory stung now, inciting an itch in Peter's chest that steadily crawled across his skin, like the beginnings of a sensory overload. True be told, he didn't feel as though he deserved any Stark Industry merchandise – free, discounted, or otherwise – after messing things up so badly.

The Friday night following his fight with Tony, after spending hours pacing the sidewalk across the street from the Tower only to return home dejected and red-eyed, to see all that stuff strewn around his room… the bitter pang of regret had made bile rise in his throat.

The hoodies were a reminder of his stupid tantrum. The t-shirts taunted him with what could have been. The thermos made him miss the tea that Tony had often made him during lab nights, to help wash down the pizza they would inevitably order.

So, into a box it had all gone, promptly shoved to the back of his closet. The action had been a means to deal with his denial and guilt and the nausea-inducing hurt of Tony's rejection. The fact one small mistake had been enough for the genius to discard –

Nope.

Out of sight, out of mind.

"When you say you don't need anything here…" Ned said leisurely, as the elevator descended towards the food hall, their next destination, "Are you strictly talking about merch, or…" He elongated that final syllable, leaning towards Peter as the word droned on, ending with a flick of his hand and a prompting jut of his chin.

Peter ignored the resurfacing taste of regret on his tongue, something akin to blood and iron and the feeling of pushing himself too far whilst hurt. He'd said a silent prayer of thanks when no one had pushed him for further details on his internship, following Dr Kobayashi's comment on him fetching something for 'Dr Stark'.

They were almost halfway through the day. He could do this.

Instead of answering Ned, he snorted, and turned towards the elevator doors, now sliding open to allow the smell of high-class cafeteria food to wash over the class.

"Come on, I'll show you my favourite food spots."

The Stark Industries food hall looked like it belonged in a shopping mall rather than a place of scientific business and experimentation, but an inordinate amount of people worked at the Tower and the owner of the Tower had an inordinate amount of money to splurge. And he

had chosen to splurge it on (at Peter's last count) thirty-seven different eateries for his employees to choose from.

There were forty spaces total available for vendors, sprawled across a full level of the Tower. Sit-down restaurants, tiny hole-in-wall family-owned places, stalls that could be packed up and moved around. All laid out in an intricate pattern Peter knew by heart. Not to mention the dozens upon dozens of seating options; old-school tables resembling Midtown's high-school cafeteria, cushioned booths, bar stools, even a few stray beanbags, but no one seemed to know where they'd appeared from.

The only thing you wouldn't find? Chain restaurants. Tony had shrugged at Peter's observation and told him that the big wigs were rarely on board with Stark Industries green-energy initiatives.

Pepper had been pressuring Tony to choose three vendors to occupy the three empty spaces since Thanksgiving, but he had been dragging it out and simultaneously refusing to let anyone else make the call.

"It's a delicate process." Tony had tutted one evening several months back, focusing on the smelting torch in his hands whilst Pepper had watched and glared. Peter had fought back a snigger from Tony's side. "If I choose a new Indian cuisine, I introduce competition for Anita. If I choose a new pizza place, I introduce competition for Marco. So much has to be taken into account and I refuse to put that decision into anyone else's hands. It's just too important."

Pepper had huffed. Tony had turned his head just enough to wink conspiratorially at Peter. Peter had grinned, feeling he was part of Tony's scheme in a way he rarely felt part of anything.

He had wondered (*worried*) the past few weeks whether Tony would make a decision in his absence, but evidently not.

Reagen led Mr Warren and Mr Harrington to a collection of tables near the back of the hall, weaving amongst the Stark Industries staff members with expert execution to avoid collisions. Four tables had A3 posters haphazardly taped in their centres, with bold letters declaring the space, 'Reserved for Field Trip Students'. The three custodians stood guard, murmuring amongst themselves and watching their charges tackle the overwhelming number of choices available to them.

Mercifully, Ned and MJ had let the subject of his not-needing-anything-from-SI go, allowing Peter to lead them around the bustling food hall and explain in exquisite detail every incredible item he had sampled and where he ranked them on a scale of one to thirteen (a meticulous grading system that accounted for sweetness, saltiness, density, sauciness (yes, even on items with no sauce), and deliciousness, amongst other things).

"Hey Peter, what's the best thing you've tried here?" Abe asked, as Peter, Ned and MJ strolled past him with their food, migrating towards the teachers. "I can't decide."

Peter stalled at the question, narrowly dodging a lab tech from the engineering department who had not anticipated Peter's pause in movement. He called after them in sheepish apology.

"Ugh, honestly, everything is pretty great. Depends on what you like!" He said, turning back towards his classmate. The amalgamated aroma wafting from his tray, which was currently balancing a delicately selected mix of gochujang-fried-chicken, south-Indian delicacies, and a plateful of miniature British puddings for dessert, had raised his spirits from their earlier dip.

He loved the Tower, after all. It wasn't all about Tony.

It *wasn't*.

"What about here?" Abe stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Jason, another member of their academic decathlon team, peering at the menu for a hole-in-the-wall Asian-fusion place Peter hadn't tried in a while, even before his sabbatical from interning.

Peter hummed, scanning the menu to remind himself what he'd liked, squeezing out of the way of two more dashing employees – interns in the AI department going by their maroon badges and their heated discussion on whether FRIDAY should still be classed as an AI, or whether that was too primeval and understated a term for all she was capable of.

"I mean it's been a few months, but last time I checked their bao buns were *incredible*, and you should get extra kimchi on the side. Oh and Jason, you like Italian sandwiches, right? I've seen you bring them to school. There's a stand just round the corner that does the most amazing ciabattas."

At Peter's answer, Abe sighed with relief. Some of the tension from his shoulders dissipated, allowing them to drop from their previous station just below the boy's ears. "Thanks Peter. It's so cool you work here." He stepped up to the counter, relaying his order to the cashier. Jason hightailed it in the direction Peter had indicated.

"I hope I get to work here one day." Ned said, a little dreamy as he glanced at Peter and MJ. They slinked towards their classmates, joining Cindy and Betty at an otherwise empty table.

"How long have you been working here? I mean, when did you start the internship?" Cindy asked Peter as he placed down his tray, catching onto their conversation. She snagged a piece of sushi between a sleek pair of steel chopsticks and lifted it to her mouth.

Other students shot glances their way, voices dying down around them to listen in.

"Last April, so, almost a year now." Peter slipped onto the bench.

*A milestone I'll never actually meet, because I don't actually intern here anymore,* he thought dryly.

"Awesome." Betty breathed. "What kind of projects have you worked on?"

Peter paused, twirling a fork between his fingers as he weighed the question. "I'm not sure how much I'm allowed to tell you, you know, with the non-disclosure agreement and

everything," Betty leant backwards, a flicker of disappointment crossing her face. "But," Betty immediately perked back up, and Peter laughed, "I've been able to visit a few different departments and labs, which has been really cool, and my, uh, more recent focus was on the development of medical devices. Diagnostics, specifically. I was assisting one of the department heads in a company-wide collaboration –"

A sharp metallic twang rang around them, cutting off Peter's steadily accelerating enthusiasm. It was loud enough to make Ned and Cindy startle, but with his heightened senses, the twang may as well have been a result of strumming Peter's brain stem, the vibrations sending shivers down his body. He shook off the sensation and looked towards the source of the noise.

Other eyes flicked Flash's way. He had stabbed his food so forcefully; he had practically impaled his tray. Peter suppressed an amused snort. Flash glared at their table, pushing his poke bowl away and crossing his arms with a petulance that bordered on toddler-like.

MJ retrieved a tiny pocket-sized sketching pad from her jacket, untucked the pencil from behind her ear, and focused in on Flash's frown lines.

Peter expected a bubble of frustration to rise at Flash's blatant jealousy – it was hardly the first time Peter would have felt that way, his hackles were frequently raised at either Flash's pompous jibes or his academic superiority (unsupported by his grades) or his constant need to vlog his high school experience.

Instead, Peter felt a bolt of confidence surge through his veins.

Sure, the internship had started out as a cover story for Spiderman, but Tony started to really mentor him, Peter had done awesome work at Stark Industries. He had been able to experiment with highly classified materials, been assigned independent projects based on his research, and solved an array of issues for others along the way.

Not to mention, he had, at least for a nine-month period, been *Tony freaking Stark's personal freaking intern.*

He was allowed to be proud of that.

"That's really cool Peter." Betty frowned at Flash disapprovingly before dragging her gaze back to Peter.

"What's really cool?" Abe slotted in beside Betty, his tray laden with bao buns and a green milk-tea Peter would have guessed was matcha-flavoured.

Jason plopped down next to Abe, landing so hard on the steel bench that Abe's food trembled, tapioca pearls bouncing within the re-usable cup.

"What are you guys talking about?" Jason picked up his ciabatta, slathered with dried meats, mozzarella, and sweet-smelling pesto, looking as if any minute his eyes would turn into cartoon hearts and beat outwards from his sockets in an outrageous display of love.

“How lucky Parker is to work here.” Cindy sighed dreamily, tucking her chin into the palm of her hand.

“I’d do anything for an internship at SI, especially before college applications start revving up.” Jason took a huge, crunching bite of ciabatta. “Hey, have you ever met Tony Stark for real?” He managed to say around a mouthful, and everyone leaned back lest they be spat at with chewed-up Italian bread. “That’s what all the rumours said last year but Flash told us it was nonsense.”

Jason jutted his chin at Flash’s sour expression – the boy’s lips were curled in an unpleasant way, teeth partially bared as he glared at his food. MJ turned the page of her miniature sketchpad and began detailing a new depiction, her food forgotten.

Before Peter could attempt an NDA-approved response of whether he knew Tony Stark, not to mention a response that was true to present day (did he know Tony Stark? Or had he *known* Tony Stark, past tense?), Abe interrupted, pausing the rapid re-sinking of Peter’s mood.

“Yeah, about that,” Abe shifted a little awkwardly where he sat. All attention narrowed in on his uneasy expression. He locked eyes with Peter, who felt a sliver of apprehension slide up his spine. “I wanted to apologise for uh, anytime I’ve maybe, laughed along or even just stayed silent when Flash or those other idiots said your internship wasn’t real. That wasn’t cool of me.” Abe’s eye contact was making Peter a little uncomfortable, but the other boy seemed determined to maintain it. “Clearly none of us really knew anything. So, yeah. Sorry.”

Abe’s chin dropped, his apology trailing into silence. The tables surrounding them had gone eerily quiet.

Peter, his cheeks warm, opened his mouth to respond –

“Well, I think that was a commendable apology. What do you think, Peter?”

Peter stilled, a shot of panic-infused adrenaline bolting down his veins. He whirled around on instinct, realised in a millisecond that most teenagers could not move faster than lightning, stopped himself from doing the one thing that could potentially make this trip worse and outing himself as a spider-powered super-teen, and almost toppled from his place on the bench.

A firm grip on his shoulder kept him from hitting the floor.

*Shit.*

The silence around them suddenly made far more sense.

Peter lifted his face, and Steve’s lips twitched with the beginnings of a smile, “Hey kid.”

“Uh, hi Mr Rogers.” Peter squeaked, utterly failing to produce a more artful response. Beside him, Ned’s jaw was on the floor. “What are you doing here?”

Steve quirked a brow at him. A muscle in his jaw ticked at the stretch of his lips. The war hero, dressed in a simple pair of jeans and a khaki-coloured t-shirt, adjusted his stance slightly as he stared down at the young vigilante.

Peter had spent a steady amount of time with Steve Rogers throughout the past year, though it had taken months for Tony to trust Steve enough to allow him around Peter on a one-to-one basis. Eventually, between revealing his identity to the extended Avengers and the Rogues last summer, then an combination of team meetings, missions, sparring sessions, game nights, and assisting Tony with tweaking the personal equipment of his fellow Avengers, Peter had gotten to know Steve bit by bit and begrudgingly come to like him (though, to vent his previous grudge, Peter still often teased the super-soldier about dropping an airport on a fourteen-year-old).

"Team meeting this afternoon." Steve said in explanation, and Peter nodded solemnly. He tried to ignore Jason's whisper of '*so cool',* and the fact that a 'team meeting' meant that other members of the Avengers were also wandering around the building.

He *desperately* tried to ignore that he had not been invited to said team meeting.

"I hope it goes well." Peter forced his facial muscles into what was meant to be a smile, but had a terrible feeling looked more like a grimace.

Steve gave him a strange look. "Me too." He said, and then raised his chin to look over Peter's classmates, "But what's this about your internship not being real?"

Abe let out a strangled noise from behind them. Peter did not turn to look.

"Was there any issue with the paperwork the school received? Pepper said it was registered with the official channels so you could receive extra credit. I can call Tony –"

"No!" Peter shouted, flinging his hands up. Steve looked taken aback. "I definitely do not need help with anything!" Peter's false enthusiasm dissipated into swift, swirling dread. If he was wearing his suit, Karen would for sure be informing him of his rapidly elevated heartbeat. "Definitely do not call To – uh, Mr Stark. Seriously, it's nothing that our field trip today hasn't cleared up."

Steve stared over his head. "Are you sure?" He asked, narrowing in on what Peter had a horrible spider-sense feeling was Flash's sour expression.

"Absolutely!" Peter exclaimed, fighting the rising tide of panic in his chest and the sweat that was dotting on his forehead, trying to regain Steve's attention. "I mean, *totally*."

He winced at the sound of his own voice. But he could not bear the thought of Steve calling Tony, and Tony being forced to come down here to sort another of Peter's messes –

Steve was frowning at him now. "You alright kid?" He asked, clearly concerned.

"Totally fine Mr Rogers Sir." Peter winced again.

"I haven't seen you around the past few months. Been busy?"

Peter forced himself to meet Steve's eye and knew, instantly, that Steve was perfectly aware of why Peter had not been around.

"Something like that." He said quietly, averting his gaze. Ned and MJ and Betty and Cindy and Jason and Abe and his whole class were a distance memory. He could not bear to turn around and face their reactions.

Steve pursed his lips. "Come here a second Peter." He stepped back, indicating that Peter should follow.

Peter bowed his head and, reluctantly, did as Steve asked, keeping his face down as they passed another table of his classmates and made their way to the edge of the food hall. He tried desperately to ignore the rise of whispers and hisses that sounded, as soon as he and Steve were out of 'normal' earshot.

Unluckily for Peter, he could hear every word.

*"Holy shit that's –"*

*"That. Is. Captain. AMERICA. It's actually Captain freaking –"*

*"What do you think they're talking about?"*

*"How do you think they met?"*

*"Ned, did you know Peter knew the fucking* Avengers*?"*

*"Does this mean Peter knows Tony Stark? Do you think he knows Bruce Banner?!"*

*"Well, the head of Research and Development asked whether Peter needed something for Dr Stark, right? I bet –"*

"Ignore them, Peter." Steve said, his voice low, and Peter tried to focus on the super-soldier rather than the whispers surrounding them. He sometimes forgot Steve had a similar sense of hearing to himself. "I didn't mean to disturb you, by coming to say hello. I am sorry if I have caused you trouble."

"It's okay, I don't mind." Peter muttered, shrugging.

He hadn't wanted to like Captain America after all that happened in Germany, and especially after Tony had returned from Siberia (Peter didn't know exactly what had happened, only that his mentor was despondent, and gritted his teeth every time Steve's name came up in conversation). He'd wanted to hate the man he had once idolized. Those first few weeks, he had refused to so much as look Steve's way - his own petty revenge for how Steve had treated Tony.

It had taken time for that to change. Clipped conversations and a few wayward but genuine compliments at the end of a mission that Steve obviously meant as an olive branch, turning into kind questions about his schoolwork and genuine interest in his hobbies and friends and

an offer to spar against someone else with super-strength similar to him, before Peter had huffingly admitted that maybe Steve Rogers was not so bad.

When he wasn't dropping airports on fourteen-year-olds.

"Do you want to talk about why I haven't seen you at the Tower the past couple months?"

Another time Peter might have even welcomed the concern. He might have leaned into it, accepting the support that, whilst not the same as Tony's, he had been missing.

Now, Peter's face burned hot with embarrassment, hands curling into his sleeves as he fought the humiliation of finally having to face his childish behaviour. He had thought he had escaped this discussion, after a few weeks had passed and it seemed as though Tony was well and truly out of his life.

His chin dropped to his chest; gaze pinned on the floor. He did not want to see the disappointment on Steve's face.

"Look, I don't know everything, only that you and Tony may have had a slight falling out." Steve's tone was kind and gentle, and Peter wanted the ground to swallow him up. "Tony… hasn't been himself, since. We've all noticed it. He misses you, Peter."

*Uh, what?*

Every self-deprecating, self-flagellating thought in Peter's brain came to a grinding halt.

Steve winced sympathetically, misreading the reaction, "I understand that Tony may have said some hurtful things, and that you are owed an apology. Tony… he isn't so great with emotions. His or other peoples. I understand that can be frustrating, but I really think it would be good for you two to talk and clear the air. Do you think you could give him another chance?"

Peter's mouth moved but no sound escaped, leaving him gaping.

Steve frowned. "Peter?"

"Huh?" Was all Peter could manage.

Steve faltered, roaming Peter's expression, "I said, do you think you could give Tony another chance?"

Peter drew in a deep breath, physically calming himself. The noises of the food hall melted away.

"I don't think Mr Stark wants to see me." He said slowly, and Steve's expression morphed into surprise. "He… he hasn't spoken to me at all, since. You know." The redness of Peter's cheeks spread to the tips of his ears. *This is exactly why he hadn't wanted to come to the Tower.* "So, I uh, think you might be wrong, about him missing me."

Steve hummed. “I understand why you would feel that way, it must have been very hurtful for Tony to stop speaking to you so suddenly.” He said, and the accuracy of the observation made tears prick at the corners of Peter’s eyes. He shifted his footing to plant his back firmly against his classmates. “But Peter, he *has* missed you. I think there has been some miscommunication –”

“There hasn’t been any communication at all.” Peter said hotly, his emotions springing to the surface.

He had tried so hard, *so hard,* to keep his feelings buried the past eight weeks. He had tried to ignore and then forget the grief of Tony abandoning him, of Peter never being more than a passing interest easily discarded. He had shoved the boxes to the back of the closet – literally and figuratively – and thrown himself into a lousy attempt to move on.

This trip was a disruption he had not seen coming, and Steve's words were hammering another nail in his coffin. He’d had a momentarily lapse of happiness and pride and confidence, but this conversation had the boxes were pushing at the closet doors, so close to bursting out into the open, and Peter was hanging on for dear life.

“Peter.” Steve’s voice dropped from softly spoken to delicate pity, balancing on the tight rope that was Peter’s ridiculous teenage emotions.

Peter steeled himself, inhaling sharply and compelling his tears to draw back into his sockets. He raised his chin and stared determinedly into Steve’s concerned eyes.

*Not today. Not here. Not in front of Captain America and not in front of my class. Hell. Fucking. No.*

“I appreciate you trying to fix this for me, Mr Rogers.” He said with restraint, his hands clamped in fists. “But as I said, you’re mistaken. I screwed up. Mr Stark doesn’t miss me, and he doesn’t want me here, and I’ve accepted that.” *Lie, lie, lie.* “I, uh... don’t think I’ll see you around much, unless aliens invade Queens or something,” He chuckled, forcing the sound past his lips, “So, uh, yeah. I gotta get back to my group. I hope your meeting goes well.”

Steve’s lips were turned down, clearly unhappy despite Peter’s half-hearted attempt at levity, but after a moment, he nodded. “Okay Queens, if that’s what you really want.” He held out a hand. Peter complied and they shook. “You need anything, or you change your mind, you give me a call okay. Anytime.”

“Sure, thanks.” Peter gave a watery smile, and lightly added, “Brooklyn.”

Steve snorted. He reached out to chuck Peter’s chin in an affectionate way, and after one last, long look, he strode off, leaving Peter stood at the edge of the food hall with two-hundred people staring at him, and a gaping hole where his heart should be.

# Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

If you have any twists to the field trip trope you would like to see, or other Irondad/Spiderson prompts you'd be interested to read, please leave a comment and let me know! :)

"Tony, there you are."

"Here I am." Tony agreed, striding into the living room and catching sight of Pepper hovering beside the elevator. He held out his arms for her inspection, a towel still clasped in one hand. "Freshly showered and ready for our meeting. See. Sometimes I listen to you." He winked, feeling pleased she was here to see evidence of his abiding of her wishes – one of the few times, if he was honest.

Pepper's returning look was half-exasperated, half-sad. Never a good sign. She sighed, leaning her hip against the back of the couch and pinning him with a serious stare.

"We need to talk about Peter."

Tony stopped dead in his tracks, torso leaning forwards with the force of gravity before he pulled himself back, avoiding a topple. He dropped his arms. His grin likewise pulled down, until his lips were a perfectly straight-line of indifference.

"Nothing to talk about." He said shortly, chucking the towel onto the nearest surface and crossing his arms, aiming for defiance and ending up somewhere closer to petulance. "Unless you wanna talk about your plan to try *force* him back here. Class trip. Clever. That was you, wasn't it? Of course it was. It has your classic this-looks-good-for-Stark-Industries-public-relations-department written all over it."

He tutted in a way he knew infuriated Pepper, got his legs working again, and aimed for the kitchen. He needed a snack before this meeting, especially if the darling love of his life was on a warpath of interference.

That shit required energy.

Pepper spun on her stilettos to follow him, "I was trying to help."

Tony groaned. "I get that, I do, but the kid –" Tony stopped short of the kitchen cabinets, swallowing past the lump in his throat. He spared Pepper a glance and shrugged. "He gets to make his own decisions. He doesn't wanna see me. That's fair. That's… It's allowed. I screwed up. It isn't okay to force him into this."

He felt the heat of Pepper's watchful observation as he blindly opened and closed various cupboards, searching for something without knowing what it was. Finding nothing of interest, he slammed the last cabinet a little too harshly. The contents rattled.

Leaning his forehead against the wood, hips digging painfully into the stone countertops, he forced breath into his chest. Each inhale pricked at his lungs like the stab of a knitting needle.

He had heard his intern's name too many times today to be able to successfully hide his hurt.

"Steve spoke to him. To Peter."

It took Tony a moment to comprehend Pepper's words. If he had been wearing his repulsors, he would have crushed the stone beneath his fingers.

"He did what?" Tony snapped, molten anger twisting with his words. "Capsicle went and bothered him, in front of his class? Jesus when I get my hands on him –"

"Peter is under the impression," Pepper continued over him, and Tony halted in his tirade, biting down on the tip of his tongue. He couldn't help it. He wanted to know. "That you do not want him here. That your two months of silence is not a sign you respect his space and decision, but instead a sign that you do not care for him and no longer have any interest in spending time with him."

It was like a ten-ton concrete block to the head, without the Ironman suit. Suddenly, Tony wasn't just finding it hard to breathe, it was *impossible.* The prickling of his lungs no longer felt like needles but a vice, squeezing the breath and the life from him.

"Wha – how –" Tony sent Pepper a gawking look, his thoughts melting into sinking puddles that he weakly waded through, trying to make sense of what Pepper was saying.

Pepper slowly reached out to take his arm, forcing him to release his rigid grip on the countertops' edges. His movements were jerky and unsteady as she pulled him away. His knuckles had turned pale from the tension.

Tony allowed himself to be led, stumbling, back into the living room. As they dropped to the couch, he knew his eyes were blown wide, and his heart, having seemingly been released from the vice around his chest, was beating wildly. It drummed against his ribs in a painful pattern.

"Peter was apparently quiet upset." Pepper continued gently, holding Tony's hands in her lap. "Steve came to talk to me right after. He thought it would be better for me to tell you. He said Peter was trying to hide it, and Steve tried to convince him that there must have been some misunderstanding."

"What –" Tony gripped Pepper's hand, brows furrowed. "What did he say, *exactly?*"

"Tony…"

"*Pepper*." Tony was filled with desperate confusion. It had infiltrated every vein in his body, every molecule of his blood, every atom in his being.

He had left Peter alone because Peter didn't want to be near him. Peter hadn't shown up for lab days, and Tony wasn't going to chase the poor kid down. He wasn't going to inflict his bad behaviour on the kid any more than he already had, and he sure as hell wasn't going to do it when he wasn't even wanted. Peter not showing up had told him everything he needed to know.

Pepper hesitated, swiping her thumb across the back of Tony's hand in a soothing motion.

"According to Steve," She said quietly, "Peter said something along the lines of, 'I screwed up. Mr Stark doesn't miss me, and he doesn't want me here'. He asked Steve to leave him alone after that, or implied it, I'm not sure."

Tony heard a noise akin to a choked gurgle leave his throat. Pepper's expression was sympathetic. She leaned forward, cupping the back of Tony's neck as he struggled to breathe.

"Tony, you need to talk to him. Please. He thinks you don't want him. That's why he hasn't been back."

Tony pushed Pepper's hands from him and stumbled to his feet, shaking his head. "No. *No.* Cap's got it wrong. Kid probably used fifteen pop culture references Capsicle didn't understand, and he's confused. He's like a hundred, after all."

"Tony –"

"He's *wrong*." Tony barked, his words a slam of defiance in the otherwise silence penthouse. The only other noise came from the mechanical whirring of the arc reactor, pulsing on his chest. "He should never have gone and bothered the kid."

"Tony, we were trying to help –" Pepper stood, reaching for him.

Tony stepped backwards, stumbling over the coffee table. He held up his hands as if warding off her good intentions. "Pep. Look. I appreciate you trying to help. I *don't* appreciate Cap's, but I'll deal with Frosty the Snowman later. I screwed up with the kid. That's on me. I gotta live with that."

As Pepper scrutinized him, Tony's chest heaved. He placed his fingers on his temples and gritted his teeth, trying to massage the rush of what he was trying to deny was denial running through him.

"You care about Peter." Pepper stated, eventually.

Tony cocked his head, bending his body to follow the movement and throwing his hands up in an exaggerated display of exasperation, and looked at her as if to say, s*eriously, you're gonna hit me with this?*

She ploughed on. "You cared about him from the moment you met him, and all those late nights tinkering away together only made you care more. Tony, I am begging you. Push past the voice in your head that sounds like your father and *talk to Peter*."

Tony opened his mouth to interrupt, the accusation tearing at something wretched and vulnerable within him, but Pepper was unyielding in the face of his dissent.

“Swallow your pride, be the adult here, and recognize that it’s worth asking.” She sucked in a sharp breath, planting her hands on her hips and pinning him with another death-defying stare. “You’ll regret it if you don’t Tony, I promise you.”

Tony, pinned to the spot by her eyes, could only breathe, and clench and unclench his fists, as he took in all she had said. Her words were not only a promise, but they also felt distinctly like a threat. In any other situation he might have smirked and played along. He wanted to be furious with her, but the feeling wasn’t there.

He had been so sure that he had been doing the right thing, leaving the kid alone. But what if…

When he could finally drag his gaze away from Pepper’s, he aimed it at the ceiling. “What if Cap *is* wrong? What if the kid…” He swallowed, and a bitter taste coated his tongue. “Turns me down?”

It was a display of vulnerability he would not have shown anybody but Pepper or Rhodey. An admission that he not only cared about Peter but would be irrevocably hurt if he put his pride, and his feelings for the kid, on the line, and was rejected.

Pepper sighed. She picked her away across the room. The penthouse was pleasantly warm and lit up by the afternoon sun currently streaming through their floor-to-ceilings windows. Her ring glinted as she took his face in her hands, the stubble scratching at the pads of her fingers.

“Is Peter worth that risk?” She asked quietly.

Tony flinched.

After a second, he swallowed the burst of pain her question caused, and leant his forehead against hers, one arm wrapping around her waist to hold her close. His heart still felt unsteady as he contemplated her question, patting in an unfamiliar beat.

They stood there for a few moments before Pepper pulled away, leaving Tony feeling as if the shrapnel in his chest had shifted and cut right through his fleshy heart. He watched her pad towards the elevator, calling for FRIDAY to take her to the auditorium on the thirtieth floor.

The doors pinged as they opened. Pepper stepped in but turned back around to face Tony, her brows drawn down in concern.

“The meeting at three,” She said, “It’s part of the field trip – we’re all going down there to answer questions for Peter’s classmates. I’m sorry I wasn’t going to tell you. Steve and I set it up, and the others know. We wanted to help get you two in the same room, give you a chance to talk, but… this needs to be your choice, Tony.”

She gave him one final smile, soft but not as sad, before the doors slid closed. Tony watched the numbers tick down until he knew she'd reached the thirtieth floor, then he collapsed back on the couch, his head in his hands.

…

After the classes' visit to the microbiology labs (a department Peter was far less familiar with and therefore could comfortably fade into the background of), they were shuffled down to the thirtieth floor and into a spacious auditorium with a semi-circle of tiered seating ten-rows-deep, all facing an open space at stall-level wide enough for a stage.

Peter could picture Pepper conducting presentations in here, easily conjuring the image of her striding across the floor in a power-suit with a microphone in hand. He would bet there was a screen behind the drawn curtains framing the back of the stage. Perhaps it was used for staff briefings, or product launches, or wide-scale press events. Something that required more space and ambiance than a conference room.

They had entered from the top level, and Peter felt a tingle shoot up his spine as he followed Ned down to the lower rows. His consequent, uneasy pause on the stairs would have caused a domino-esque reaction responsible for sending half the class tumbling had Abe, behind him, not caught his footing so quickly, grasping onto Peter's shoulder with a laugh.

Two stairways split the rows into three sections. Mr Warren and Mr Harrington directed them to the lowest rows of the middle section, directly in front of the stage. The class spread themselves out, chattering excitedly and continually discussing the microbiology labs, where the graduating interns had put on a thrilling display showcasing each of their personal projects.

Peter, Ned, and MJ settled into seats in the fourth row back. Cindy and Betty were directly below them. Jason and Abe and another boy named Kieren shuffled into the fifth row, not directly above Peter and his friends but diagonal, a few seats to the right. Flash and his cronies, predictably, jostled themselves into the first. Mr Warren perched on the edge of the second row, left section, and Mr Harrington took the edge seat on the fifth row, right section, to bracket everyone between the two teachers.

"What do you think this is? Some kind of careers talk?" Ned whispered excitedly. He was tapping on the armrests with enthusiasm, the pattering soft against the fabric.

"Dude, why are you whispering?" Peter's lips twitched with amusement. "It's probably a movie about Stark Industries, to end the day. I'd bet there's a screen behind those curtains."

Another flash of warning bolted up his spine. Peter tensed.

Ned frowned at him, "Peter?"

Peter scrutinized the empty seats, his classmates, Mr Warren, the stage. He even twisted around and briefly caught Mr Harrington's eye. Nothing caused a third shiver to run across his skin, and he sunk down into his plush chair, shaking his head.

Was it just being here, in the Tower? Had the anxiety of the day gotten to him? Was it the remnants of Steve's words echoing in his head causing this reaction? Maybe he was just tired and ready to go home.

"Not sure." He muttered. "Something feels… off."

"Your Peter-tingle?" Ned's expression morphed into fright.

"*Please* don't call it that."

He continued to inspect the auditorium, trying to place the reason for his *senses* to be going off right now. Reagen had vanished side-stage after asking them all to sit still and be patient, but the law intern was returning, and Peter sat up straighter at the change in his posture.

Reagen practically *skipped* across the stage – which must have been difficult with a stool in each hand. Reagen set the stools down on the stage, and the students dissolved into heated discussion.

*"I bet it is a career's talk then – I heard Ned Leeds say something like that."*

*"Maybe it's some of the other heads of departments?"*

*"I kind of hope there is an intern or two, I'd love to ask them more questions."*

*"Does Peter not know?"*

The chatter only grew when Reagen disappeared off-stage and returned to set down two more stools. This process repeated three more times, leaving a total of ten stools on stage. He fussed and fiddled, ensuring they were all equally spaced, seemingly unbothered that the crowd of high school students and teachers (who appeared as clueless as the students as to what was happening) watched him with their breathing stalled.

Reagen gave a thumbs up to someone left of stage, hiding from the class's view, and Peter found himself craning his neck with the rest of them to try glance a peep.

"Boys and girls, students and teachers, nerds, geeks, and future scientists," Reagen called out, clapping his hands together from centre stage to regain their attention – which he had never lost. Everyone was zeroed in, but he had to raise his voice to be heard over the excitement spreading through the stands. "Are you ready for the greatest surprise ever?"

Jason led the whooping. Peter's classmates slapped their hands against their armrests, creating an anticipatory drumroll, cheering and laughing with expectation and eagerness, the tension climbing with every second that Reagen kept them on the ropes.

Peter kept his eyes trained on the left of stage, dread pooling in his gut.

“Midtown it is my honour to introduce to you the CEO of Stark Industries, Miss Pepper Potts!”

Peter lurched, his stomach falling so hard and fast he thought he might have heard it slap the linoleum beneath his seat.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

Every single student besides Peter jumped to their feet, including Ned and MJ. The auditorium shook with the force of their collective stamping and hollering as Pepper, straight-backed and waving, strode onto the stage, a microphone clasped in one hand.

It was just as Peter had imagined, except it wasn’t for the benefit of her staff members, or a group of reporters. It was for him and his class. He almost groaned. He was never going to be able to escape Pepper, of all people.

*I should have known.*

Peter had seen Pepper the night of his argument with Tony. She had been laid up on the couch reading a hefty legal document, comfortably dressed in an old band t-shirt of Tony’s and her feet up on the armrest, when he’d bounded into the Tower’s penthouse, aiming for the kitchen.

Tony had told Peter countless times he was welcome to anything in the penthouse and encouraged to eat before working in the labs, “Can’t have any spider-baby’s fainting on me in the middle of a remodel,” He had said, ruffling Peter’s curls. FRIDAY had even begun stocking enough sandwich supplies to satisfy Peter’s endless cravings.

Nevertheless, he had frozen at the sight of Pepper that night, feeling decidedly caught when, at the sound of his entrance, her head had risen curiously.

Spotting Peter, stood entirely still with one foot raised like a cartoon burglar, Pepper had laughed and happily waved towards the kitchen, encouraging him to help himself to the leftover Thai food in the fridge and the mountain of muffins, freshly baked, on the kitchen counters.

“God knows you must be hungry after a day of classes,” she’d said, stretching as she spoke. “Go on, Tony made sure there was plenty left for you.”

She’d come to the kitchen as he’d prepared a plate, discarding her paperwork and instead asking about his classes, whether he had much homework, how May was doing, whether his friends were just as busy as he was. She had reminded him not to let Tony work him too hard.

There had been a strong maternal undercurrent to her probing, a soft concern that turned sharp at the mention of Flash’s name, and clearer with the insistent way she had pressed another muffin into his arms as he’d dashed towards the labs.

While Tony’s discarding of their relationship had been the hammer on his heart, the loss of Pepper’s care and company had been a secondary blow Peter had quietly grieved the past

eight weeks.

“Good afternoon, Midtown,” Pepper greeted over the noise of twenty-four screaming teenagers, her voice carrying a tinny quality through the microphone. Peter supposed it must have been an old model, not the new microphones Stark Industries had released last summer.

Cindy and Betty were on their feet in front of him, holding hands and jumping up and down. Peter inched himself back in his seat, somewhat afraid one of them would start blubbing. Even MJ had cupped her hands around her mouth, her shout mixing and blending into the deafening commotion.

“What a lovely greeting!” Pepper’s kind voice rang out, truly pleased. “Welcome, welcome. I am so glad to see you all here. As you may know, Stark Industries does not typically offer field trips for high school students, but I am so happy we were able to make an exception. Have you enjoyed your day?”

The class screamed louder.

Peter slid down his seat, chin tucked into his neck, desperate to press his hands against his ears and block at least some of the noise. A phantom itch scratched across the back of his neck, and he knew Mr Harrington was staring at him, wondering why he was not on his feet with the rest of the class. He did not turn around this time, stubbornly ignoring the sensation.

“I’m so glad to hear it.” Pepper laughed into the microphone at their unruly retort, “Now, I’d ask you to sit, but as you can see, we are expecting some friends of mine, and I expect you’d all be up again straightaway.”

Ned was *vibrating* besides Peter, like a boombox on full volume.

Or perhaps, was the entire auditorium vibrating with the climbing intrigue? The stench of teen suspense was thick and suffocating. No one seemed able to stay still except for Peter.

*Maybe… was Pepper the reason his class had been offered a field trip… why would she –*

Betty tilted sideways, gripping at Cindy with all her might. It opened a gap between his classmates, and Peter counted the stools again. Pepper had delicately perched herself on the farthest left. He watched her with suspicion.

Ten stools total.

*Nine more people.*

Peter’s stomach churned, feeling small in his seat whilst his surrounding classmates remained on their feet, towering over him.

*Steve, in the cafeteria –*

“A team meeting, of sorts.”

The world narrowed, and Peter's gaze pinned on Pepper through the swaying gaps of his classmates moving this way and that. He didn't think she had spotted him, though her eyes danced across the rows in what Peter suspected was a targeted search. Within his clenched fist, his nails bit at his palm.

*Oh god. I'm fucked, aren't I?*

Pepper raised the microphone back to her lips. "For a very special, one-time-only, Midtown High exclusive," She announced, gesturing to backstage, "Please welcome, the Avengers!"

Peter's seat *jolted* as the sheer force of his classmate's stationary stampede swelled and hit a crescendo, and he watched through the gaps between bodies as Bruce Banner, James Rhodes, Steve Rogers, Sam Wilson, Natasha Romanoff, Clint Barton, Wanda Maximoff, and the Vision, walked on stage.

They were waving and smiling. Sam took a mock bow, clearly enjoying the reaction, and Steve teasingly jostled his shoulder, laughing. Clint whispered something to Natasha. The Vision remained impassive.

Peter saw Flash and his cronies in the front row, arms in the air and hollering like their lives depended on it. He saw Jeanie and Matthew, last year's decathlon alternates, jumping up and down in the second row, screaming '*Oh my god, oh my god!'*. Betty had slapped a hand over her mouth in pure shock, the other holding up a now-crying Cindy. Ned was hooting louder than Peter had ever heard him. MJ was clapping politely. He couldn't even make out the words Jason and Abe and Kieren were yelling out behind them, their volume strangling the enunciation.

And Peter?

Peter stared down the empty stool between Rhodey and Steve.

He sat perfectly still, despite the slight tremor racing across his skin and the bile stinging in his throat, ignoring his classmates and resisting the urge to clap his hands over his ears to stop his mind from curdling into a sensory overload.

*Does Tony really hate me that much?*

He didn't want it to be true. He didn't think his actions – whilst childish – all those weeks ago had deserved *this*, such abject avoidance, even at the expense of his classmates. But the empty stool stared back at him, and the nervous glances between Pepper and Steve were all the additional evidence he needed.

Tony wasn't coming.

And it was because of Peter.

And Peter wanted to *run*.

He wanted to bolt up the stairs and throw open the doors. He wanted to hide under the seats and be left there, forever forgotten. He wanted the ground to swallow him up and spit him out

again anywhere but here. He wanted to magically summon his web-shooters and swing into the rafters, where nobody could reach him. He wanted to take a running leap off the penthouse balcony and disappear between the skyscrapers of New York, clad in a onesie-looking red and blue uniform, and never step foot in this *fucking* Tower ever again.

Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes as he forcibly inhaled a shaky breath, shoving air into his lungs with all the will he had left to give. His classmates were still hollering, but Mr Warren and Mr Harrington's voices had joined the swell, encouraging everyone to sit.

Choking back the pain in chest, Peter slapped one hand against his cheek, catching the falling tear and wiping it against his jeans, the evidence of his hurt hidden against the dark blue denim.

"Peter?"

One of Ned's hands tentatively touched Peter's shoulders. Peter flinched away, inching into the corner of his seat and shaking his head.

His friends had gone quiet, focusing in on him. Ned dropped down to Peter's right, perching anxiously on the edge of the cushions. MJ's fingers twitched towards her jacket, as if she wanted to take out her sketches and commit Peter's expression to paper but was resisting. It was probably one of the kindest things Peter had ever seen her do.

One by one, students calmed enough to take their seats, their incredulous chatter still loud and battering against Peter's eardrums, and as they slipped down, Peter's view of the stage became unobscured.

And the Avenger's view of him, likewise.

Peter felt the moment each of their stares snapped left and landed on him, slouched down in his seat pretending he didn't exist. Nausea rolled in his gut, so he stared determinedly at his own knees and tried to breathe in a consistent pattern.

*Breathe in. Hold. Breathe out. Breathe in. Hold. Breathe out.*

*Tony had taught him to do this.*

Peter's breath caught.

His scalp felt tight as he bowed his head, and he strongly suspected it was either Natasha or Wanda pinning him with such a burning look that heat was spreading from his top of his crown and inching all the way down to his toes. He flexed them instinctively.

"Good morning, Midtown High. It is nice to see you all again." Steve greeted, receiving a cacophony of yells in response.

"Again? Don't tell me you got ahead of us to try get them all on side Rogers?" Clint tutted, though his words held no malice. The class laughed.

"I simply said hello."

“That’s what they all –”

“This session,” Pepper interrupted, leaning forwards to shoot Clint an exasperated look down the line. Clint winked back, hitching up one foot to rest on the low rung of the stool. “Is purely for your benefit, students. The team has kindly volunteered to hold a question-and-answer session wherein you may ask about their powers, their work as a member of the Avengers, their work outside of the team, or anything else that piques your interest. Of course, we ask you to be respectful, and understand that they all have the right to refuse a question.”

Peter raised his chin by barely a centimetre, glimpsing Pepper as she shared another skeptical look with Steve, then flicked her gaze to Rhodey, who sighed and shook his head.

“If you are wondering about our missing guest,” Pepper slid her focus back to the students, and Peter turned his body sideways and avoided her sympathetic stare like it was infected with the plague. Her tone was light. She’d had more than enough practice creating last-minute cover stories for her fiancé. “Mr Stark was due to join us, but I believe he may have gotten carried away with his tinkering –”

“Ye of little faith. Never fear my love, for I am here.”

# Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

If you have any twists to the field trip trope you would like to see, or other Irondad/Spiderson prompts you'd be interested to read, please leave a comment and let me know! :)

Peter's heart slammed against his chest. It was a miracle his head did not roll off his neck at the speed in which it snapped sideways and suddenly –

There was Tony.

The genius-billionaire-*former*-playboy-philanthropist swept onto the stage from exit-left, his suit immaculate, his sunglasses tucked into his shirt, raising one hand in a wave towards Peter's classmates as he aimed for centre-stage amidst newly reinvigorated cries of delight. His fellow superheroes rolled their eyes, whispering good-naturedly about Tony always needing to make a dramatic entrance.

Meanwhile, a truly startling amount of adrenaline was shooting through Peter's bloodstream. The devastation he had felt, believing Tony was avoiding him to such a drastic extent, ebbed away, and was replaced with disbelief. His spider-senses were going haywire, flooding his mind with the instinctual need to protect himself whilst simultaneously trying to judge whether there was really anything he needed protection from.

Unable to fight or take flight from this situation, he remained frozen like a fawn. He could only stare as Tony slipped onto the centre stool between Rhodey and Steve, smiling his camera-ready smile, perfectly professional.

*Tony was here. He wasn't trying to avoid Peter – but Pepper and Steve had clearly thought he would, or might. So what now? Would Tony ignore him, even whilst they sat in the same room? Did he care that Peter was here? Did he not care at all and that was why he could show up here entirely unbothered?*

The hurt of Tony's rejection was a steady, throbbing pain beneath Peter's ribs, like pressing down on a colourful bruise and feeling the ache of it spread beneath your fingers, pooling to the surface as he watched Tony get settled.

"Oh, he rhymes now." Rhodey quipped, and beneath the current of delighted squeals that had erupted at the engineer's entrance there was chuckled amusements from both the Avengers and the Midtown guests.

"He is a man of many, many talents." Tony raised an eyebrow at Rhodey, then wiggled it.

Rhodey snorted, “Being on time ain’t one of them though.”

“A small price to pay for brilliance, platypus.”

Tony and Rhodey’s banter was as familiar to Peter as breathing. The students were lapping it up, and Peter found it impossible to suppress his own flicker of amusement at their easy comradery. It dissipated some of his nerves, worming between the cracks and offering comfort amongst the unease.

“If you two are done,” Sam rolled his eyes, and Bruce chuckled.

“Not quite sour-puss.” Tony said, leaning his forearms on his thighs, staring out into the crowd. “So, how’s the tour been everyone?”

Twenty-two teenage voices rang out all at once. Peter felt a swell of appreciation for Ned and MJ, who remained silent alongside him. The worried looks they had shot Peter at Pepper and the Avenger’s appearance had turned somewhat panicky now Tony had entered the fray.

“That’s great, that’s great. Hey, and you’ve got one of our own with you.” Tony clapped, and his gaze swept the students until he found his target, far quicker than Pepper had.

Peter sucked in a breath.

Tony’s eyes locked with his.

*Shit.*

Tony smiled, the corners of his lips ticking upwards hesitantly. “Hey Pete,” he said, his projecting, auditorium-filling voice gone undoubtably soft, “Good to see you.”

Peter’s heart leapt out of his chest, hit the floor, and began to flop, uselessly, down the stairs.

“Did you, uh, get to show everyone around the Research and Development labs?” Tony persisted. “You know that place like the back of your hand, and I bet Dr Kobayashi was pleased to see you.”

*Did he – had Tony just – but Peter thought – and if he had – did that mean –*

To Peter, the moment was suspended in time, moving in slow-motion like the action-sequence in one of his favourite films. He gaped at Tony, who, if Peter didn’t know better, he’d say looked *unsure,* tapping restlessly on his leg as he waited for Peter’s response. They were both ignoring the two-dozen astounded students whose heads were swinging from him to Tony and back again.

*But, he’s mad at me, he doesn’t want me here. Right? But he’s here. And he’s talking, and asking – Am I dreaming?*

Another jolt of electricity crackled down Peter’s spine.

*Was Steve… right?*

Pepper's eyes flicked between Peter and Tony as though she was attending the championship game at Wimbledon. The rest of the Avengers followed suit, some grinning or smirking, some wincing or simply waiting. The students were swivelling in their seats to stare at Peter, open-mouthed incredulity transforming their expressions into something Peter wanted to flinch away from. Ned and MJ were watching him cautiously, like he was a ticking-time-bomb about to blow.

And Peter still hadn't spoken.

The disbelief at Tony's direct greeting had rendered him utterly useless and unable to respond. His brain flicked through every possible way he could have gotten the past eight weeks wrong, and then immediately flicked backwards through all the ways he had been sure he had been right.

"Peter?" Tony called his name again, and now Peter *knew* there was uncertainty in his tone, turning his name into a question Tony clearly didn't know the answer to.

It caused a second spark of lightning to jolt through Peter's blood, forcing life back into his body. He heaved an unsteady breath, fingers digging into his thighs, trapped under the stares of his classmates, friends, teachers, and heroes.

"Yeah, the labs were great, Mr Stark." He finally said, clearing his throat. Relief flashed across Tony's face. "We've had, uh, a really, really good day."

"Well, I'm really, really glad, kid." Tony said, the reassurance he had gained from Peter's words palpable in his loosened shoulders.

*Kid.*

To Peter, it felt as they were the only two people there.

Tony shuffled on his seat, "We'll… talk after, yeah?"

Peter's chest constricted, his throat closing as the tentative, hopeful question barreled through him.

Tony's rejection was singing a melody beneath his skin, a song Peter had tried to silence the past two months but was louder than ever now he was staring directly into the man's eyes.

Peter thought of himself pacing the street across from the Tower that Friday night, mindlessly begging his phone to ring, and the way he had shoved all his Stark Industries merch into boxes, as if in a frenzy, and pushed them to the back of his closet.

He knew that his classmates were all watching him with bated breath. No doubt Flash's parents would have to organise a whole series of dentist appointments for him post haste, with the inevitable damage that had been done today. Not to mention Peter would be the talk of the school for weeks if not months to come, now his internship had been confirmed, and everyone had learned the Avengers *themselves* knew Peter by name.

But all he could focus on was the worried glint in Tony's eye, and the anxious twist of his lips. He narrowed in on the consistent tapping of Tony's fingers against the stool he sat upon. Peter had seen Tony present that particular tick before – but only in the midst of mission meetings, or when Peter had been hurt on patrol and Tony oversaw his being patched up in the med bay.

Tony cocked his head and mouthed '*please*'.

Peter's heart stuttered.

*Please. Talk to me.*

"Okay." Peter managed to croak, and Tony's heaved a breath deep enough his shoulders slumped. Instantly, his lips split into a wide, relieved smile that made Peter's head spin, but likewise compelled a similar, smaller smile to his own lips - cautious, but pleased.

"Excellent!" Pepper said brightly, with a beam that stretched from ear to ear, and were there… tears, in her eyes? They were gleaming, that was for sure.

The exclamation caused both Peter and Tony to swiftly jolt from their sheltered bubble, where they two alone had existed and all attention had been on each other. Peter shrivelled slightly as he fully comprehended the number of people gaping at him, but did not miss how Rhodey subtly raised an arm to pat Tony on the back, or how Steve reached up and lightly squeezed Tony's shoulder. Nor did Peter miss the wink Natasha sent his own way, or the small dip of Clint's chin in his direction, augmented with a smirk.

Ned was vibrating again, and Peter could not resist a huff of laughter when his best friend leaned over and bumped their shoulders together, whispering, "Oh my god dude!" with so much excitement, he could have lit up the Empire State Building.

"Shall we begin?" Pepper motioned to the Avengers and the entire class shot their hands into the air to ask their questions.

Bruce seemed shocked each time a student bounced to their feet and began with, 'Dr Banner, it's such an honour!', rattling off a question concerning his research in biochemistry and gamma radiation. He managed a stilted, bewildered thanks after the sixth student sat down, explaining how grateful he was for the chance to speak about his scientific contributions, rather than his green alter-ego.

Rhodey spoke of his time at MIT – slipping in some application and interview tips which had everyone scribbling down furious notes – and laughed at a question regarding the heaviness of the War Machine suit.

Steve gave further explanations to the strength and durability of his shield and how the super-serum had changed him, spoke of his transition into modern day, and groaned as one brave student asked about his PSAs for the Department of Education, much to the delight of the Avengers.

Sam looked gratified to be asked a question regarding his work as a counsellor for other veterans, launching into a speech on the importance of mental health for military personnel (and superheroes, he had added, with a pointed look at his teammates).

Natasha expertly dodged a question on her training as an assassin, instead focusing on how her skills contributed to SHIELD and the Avengers team, and proudly spoke of being the only female in the original six members of the Avengers.

Clint was stopped from giving a demonstration of his exploding arrows by panicked Pepper, and, grumbling, switched to a normal arrow, hitting the exact mark in the far corner of the room the student had chosen as his target. He also taught the class several phrases in sign language.

Wanda diffidently agreed to a demonstration of her magic, and when they were delighted rather than fearful, went so far as to lift a student off their feet and hover them in the air for a few moments, to the entranced coos of the class.

Vision patiently explained his sentience to Mr Harrington, and how had he come to be (though Peter knew it was a somewhat, *redacted,* version of the events).

Pepper was pleasantly surprised to receive several questions about her position as CEO of Stark Industries. Peter and Ned had shared a grin as MJ seamlessly delivered such a question, but they both noticed her shaking legs as she sat back down – MJ was easily Pepper Pott's biggest fan.

Tony, of course, was asked the most questions, and he answered every single one – about the origins of Stark Industries, the first Iron Man suit, the way Stark Industries had switched to a green initiative, how the Avengers worked together as a team, the implications of the Accords, what an influx of superhumans and persons capable of magic meant for the wider world, what advice he would give to aspiring Stark Industries employees, what scientific developments he was most excited to see, the capabilities of his latest Iron Man suit, reports of the Avengers latest mission and how Iron Man had saved the day, the potential rise of nanotechnology, and –

"Mr Stark, who's *your* favourite superhero?" Betty asked in a journalist's tenor.

"Spiderman." Tony said promptly.

Peter blushed from the tips of his ears to the soles of his feet as his classmates cheered.

Betty beamed, "Our school is in Queens so I think a lot of us would agree, but may I ask, considering all the superheroes sat here today and whom you've worked with, why Spiderman?"

Tony leant back, crossing his arms. "Spiderman, and keep in mind I know the guy personally," He said, cocky enough that he was clearly bragging, and the students chuckled, "Is everything a superhero should aim to be – good, kind, looks out for the little guy. It's easy with the power that we up here hold to forget those simple things. Spiderman never does. He is endlessly *good*. Queens is lucky to have him."

Peter had never fought so hard to keep his face neutral, as all the other Avengers nodded along to Tony's words, and his classmates clapped with fervour. He was a little worried he'd get lockjaw from how tense he was holding his muscles.

"We'll take one last question, and then unfortunately our time is up!" Pepper said to loud croons of disappointment.

Clint interrupted the noise. "Peter hasn't asked a single question!"

Peter stilled.

The Avengers all turned in his direction, amused at his obvious uncomfortableness.

"You're right Barton." Steve said, nodding, "Go on Peter, finish us off. Only seems right."

"Does it?" Peter muttered, pushing himself up to sit straighter against the cushions, and Steve, who would have been the only one to hear him, suppressed a chuckle.

Tony, on the other hand, was frowning in Steve and Clint's direction.

"Only if you want to Pete." He called up to Peter, his face suddenly lined with creases of worry, and Peter once again caught Tony's eye and was taken aback by the care and anxiety he found lurking there.

*How badly had he judged Tony, the past eight weeks?*

"Yeah, yeah, the question should be, who's *Peter's* favourite superhero," Sam joked, giving Peter a blissful few seconds to think. "Cause whoever he asks clearly takes the title –"

"Well, it ain't you, that's for sure." Clint scoffed, and Sam turned on him, outraged.

*"How dare you –"*

"Mr Stark?" Peter said, swallowing past the lump in his throat.

"Well, what a fucking surprise."

"*Barton.*"

"Sorry children."

Tony tipped his head towards the ceiling, looking as though he was counting to three, before he dropped his chin and looked at Peter with a gentle, open expression that Peter had never seen him use in public, "Yeah, kid?"

Peter pushed to his feet, wringing his hands together as his classmates stared expectantly.

He took a deep breath, dislodging some of the anxiety in his chest as he met Tony's eye and smiled hesitantly, "Would you ever consider creating a summer internship programme for high school students?" He asked, forcing his voice to carry, and not shake. "Or any other

scheme where they are able to gain some of the experience I have whilst interning here? I know every single one of my classmates would be interested in applying, if not our entire school, and there's the kids we compete against in competitions like the academic decathlon, who come from all over the country, anyone who wants to go to MIT or a STEM school or even has an interest. I mean, you'd have thousands of interested applicants with ease."

Peter could have gone on longer, but forced his mouth closed, feeling as though he'd made his point.

"What a perfect question to end on, Peter." Pepper complimented.

Tony's lips twisted with genuine consideration as he contemplated the question. "Well, we've only ever hired interns at the graduate level before –"

"Apart from Peter." Jason interrupted, loudly and gleefully. Peter flushed as his classmates cheered and hollered, beaming up at him with what he thought might be *pride*.

To hear them cheer for his vigilante alter-ego was one thing, but for Peter Parker? Just a normal, Lego-obsessed, teenage nerd from Queens? It was like something out of a comic book.

Holy shit, was he going to walk out of this field trip… *popular*?

Tony nodded, not bothering to make some quippy, incensed comment after being cut off by a sixteen-year-old, "Apart from Peter, yes, but he was a special case."

"Got that right." Came a mutter from the first row.

Peter's tentative happiness dissolved in an instant.

Tony stilled.

*And things were going so well.*

Tony slowly twisted his body, adjusting until he could comfortably narrow his eyes on Flash. The entire Avengers team followed his example.

"What did you just say?" Tony questioned; his voice deceptively calm.

Peter gulped. He could only see a sliver of Flash's profile from where he stood, and the decathlon alternate quickly began to stutter under the weight of so many menacing stares, "Well – I just meant, Sir – that Pu – Peter is –"

"You got something to say about my intern?" Tony rose to his feet, kicking back his stool and crossing his arms. The eyes of everyone in the room snagged on the glow of the arc reactor attached to Tony's chest.

Peter's heart leapt into his throat.

*My intern*.

*Tony still thought of him as* his *intern.*

Mr Warren had half-risen from his seat, head swivelling between Flash and the genius-billionaire-superhero-philanthropist, clearly conflicted as to whether he should intervene.

Flash slid down in his seat. “Well, I –”

“There’s a right answer here Mr Thompson.”

“I didn’t mean to – how do you know my –”

“And that’s the *wrong* answer. Wanna try again?”

“This is the best day of my life.” Ned whispered.

“Shh!” Peter hissed.

“I only meant –” Flash garbled.

Tony cocked his head, “Oh yeah, what did you mean?”

Peter was gripping his armrest like his life depended on it.

Ned was gripping Peter’s arm like *his* life depended on it.

MJ flipped open her sketchbook, licking the end of her pencil.

Flash sat up straighter, his usual, snide arrogance leeching back into his words, “I want to know how and why Peter Parker, of all people, managed to get an internship here, underage.”

Tony snorted, “Because he’s brilliant and kind, two things you clearly are not.”

Peter’s knees buckled. A tidal wave of gratitude rushed through and over him as Tony continued to glare down at Flash, unmoving.

Flash let out an insulted gargle from the back of his throat.

“Tony.” Pepper said warningly, diverting everyone’s attention.

“I think it was a more than justified comment.” Natasha drawled, ignoring the warning (Natasha was perhaps the only person who had never seemed to fear Pepper's wrath) and coming to stand beside Tony. The Avengers shifted, as if they too were contemplating their stances. Steve and Clint took their feet off the rungs of their stools and planted them on the floor. Wanda’s forefinger twitched. “To sit here and insult Tony’s personal intern, in front of Tony himself, hardly screams Ivy League.”

Flash twisted around immediately, staring in horror at Peter, “You’re Tony Stark’s personal intern?”

Peter looked at Tony.

Tony looked at Peter.

Peter looked at Flash, “Yeah, I am.”

Flash let loose a strangled whine resembling a wounded animal, a mix of defeat and disbelief that caused several of their classmates to start laughing uncontrollably, unable to hold back their enjoyment at Flash’s takedown any longer – but Peter was focused on the relief radiating from Tony once more. The genius had tipped his head back and was looking at Peter, his expression open and welcoming and possibly even affectionate, everything Peter had wished to see the past two months and thought he never would again.

“I think that concludes our afternoon together, Midtown High.” Pepper loudly announced, smoothing down her suit and glaring half-heartedly at Tony.

Tony tore his eyes away from Peter, rolling them at his fiancé, “If you insist my dear.”

The class mumbled their disappointment, and Mr Warren finally managed to find his feet, having chosen not to interrupt Tony’s takedown of Midtown’s most haughty and pompous bully. As he seemed poised to open his mouth, possibly to ask the class to thank the Avengers, Bruce stepped forward, gesturing to the students.

“Wait a second, Tones, you never answered Peter’s question.”

Tony paused, spinning on his heel, “So I didn’t.”

“That’s okay,” Peter called down the stands, and some of his classmates looked at him pleadingly – whether they just wanted more time with the Avengers or actually wanted to know the answer to Peter’s question, he wasn’t sure, “I have a different question, instead.”

“Shoot.” Tony cocked his head to the side, intrigued.

Peter only allowed himself half a second of doubt.

*Go on. Be brave.*

“What are we working on tonight?”

The auditorium was deadly silent.

*Please. Please. Please.*

Tony’s face *split* with the force of his grin, “Well kid, I think we’re working on a summer internship programme for high school students. It sounds like the start of a great senior project for you.”

Peter’s breath whooshed out, ruffling Betty’s hair with its force. The relief rocketing through his veins was enough to truly make his knees buckle, and he dropped down into his seat with a thud, though not for one second did his own grin recede.

“Peter’s a sophomore, Tony.”

“I’m perfectly aware of the kid’s excessive youth, Cap.” Tony rolled his eyes, grin replaced with mock irritation as Steve and the other Avengers got to their feet. “If we start now, we can trial-run this summer, work out the kinks in time to roll-out a fully-fledged programme next year, and he’ll have a solid foundation and two summers of data to work off in senior year.”

Peter was nodding along, dazed by Tony’s grin but simultaneously already running through potential security issues in his head that they would have to solve. Who would oversee the students? How would they rank applications? How many students would be admitted? Could they get all of the departments on board? Could they get *Happy* on board?

He didn’t miss Pepper’s soft, adoring look, amusedly bouncing between him and Tony.

“I’m sure all our students will look forward to hearing updates about the programme from Peter, and eagerly anticipating submitting their own applications once the programme becomes reality.” Mr Warren at last found a moment of Tony’s dialoguing he felt comfortable inserting himself into, and the Avenger’s gazes slid over to Peter’s chemistry teacher, “And we are all, so, so thankful for your time this afternoon. Aren’t we Midtown High?”

The class roared in approval, and the Avengers took the opportunity to make their final bows and wave goodbye. They slipped backstage, one by one.

Except for Tony, who stepped forward, shook Mr Warren’s hand, graciously received the man’s excited babble, crossed the stage, kissed Pepper on the cheek, and made his way up the stairs towards Peter.

Nerves suddenly alight and buzzing beneath his skin, Peter remained in his seat, twisting the sleeve of his hoodie beneath his fingers. As Tony approached, Ned and MJ edged out of the row towards Mr Harrington, leaving him to it. Ned gave him two thumbs’ up before shuffling up the stairs.

Peter took a long breath; the kind that made his lungs burn with the stretch of their expansion, and pushed a slow exhale out between his pursed lips.

He watched his friends go, turned his head, and found in front of him the one person he'd promised to avoid today.

"Hey kid."

# Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

> Second-to-last chapter! If you have any twists to the field trip trope you would like to see, or other Irondad/Spiderson prompts you'd be interested to read, please leave a comment and let me know! :)

Tony raised his hand as if to start half-heartedly waving from two feet away, but quickly dropped it with an embarrassed wince, “Hey Pete.”

“Hey Mr Stark.” Peter smiled weakly. His stomach was infested with over-eager butterflies, determined to escape from his gut through any means. The sleeve of his hoodie was practically fraying between his fingers. He glanced to where Pepper was speaking with Mr Warren, “Great presentation.”

“All thanks to Pepper, as most good things in my life are.”

Peter nodded absentmindedly, desperately trying to think of something else to say and simultaneously itching the skin beneath his sleeve as a distraction, fingers digging deep into the grooves of his forearm.

“Kid?”

“Hm?”

“Look at me would you.”

Peter tilted his head upwards a little more, and Tony’s concerned face swam back into view.

He felt the corners of his eyes begin to sting, and all the emotions of the past eight weeks rise and crash inside his chest. His gut rolled as he examined the crease of Tony’s bushy eyebrows, the stubble coating his cheeks and chin, the tiny crack on the sunglasses hanging from the neckline of his shirt. Was that a new scar, inching out beneath the collar of his suit?

Moments and memories swam to the surface – from that very first day Peter had met Tony, to the last time they had seen each other. The significant and the insignificant blended together to create a mind map of their relationship in Peter’s eyes.

One memory took precedence. It shoved past the others and waved its fragile arms, begging to be seen, to be remembered, to be heard, to be *believed*. It was a moment Peter had tried to banish from his mind these past eight weeks, the one that had caused him the most pain and the most regret, even more so than their fight. The one he looked back upon in the depths of

the night and wondered how he could have ever believed in that second that Tony might actually –

As one betraying tear was about to slip down Peter's cheek, Tony's face softened to something disastrously close to pity.

He held out a hand.

Peter eyed the suspiciously clean fingers for a moment, glad of something to focus on that was not his own thoughts – had he ever seen Tony's hands without even a smudge of oil on them? – before cautiously reaching out his own.

Tony's skin was warm to the touch, and Peter would have perhaps commented on this as a distraction to his own emotions if not for –

"*Wowh –"* Peter let out an undignified squawk as Tony hauled him up and yanked him close. He stumbled, collapsing into Tony's chest with a thud and an ungraceful '*oomf'*. The arc reactor pressed into his collarbone. The underlying scent of motor oil had his limbic system instantaneously whirring, evoking memory after memory of afternoons and evenings spent laughing at lab time or messing around during movie night.

Everything he had been missing.

"I fucked up." Tony's murmured, arms tightening around Peter's back, "I fucked up really badly, and I am sorry. I never meant – I should have – I'm not good at this shit Peter, but I promise I'm trying. I'll try *harder.*"

Peter's insides flipped.

For a long second, he didn't know what to say. He opened and closed his mouth against Tony's shoulder, attempting to formulate a half-decent response but his thoughts raced too fast for him to grab one, no matter how frantically he reached.

In his restlessness, he drew back, and swiftly regretted that decision as the warmth of Tony's embrace retracted, and icy unease crept back in.

Tony let him go, but something in his posture felt reluctant. His hands slid down Peter's forearms, hesitant to let the younger boy go too far.

"You didn't – I mean, you don't –" Peter grimaced. He didn't know what to say.

"I want to." Tony said firmly, understanding Peter anyway, "I fucked up, but I… I want you here, Pete. I hope, maybe, when you come to the lab tonight, we could talk stuff through? If you still want to –"

"Yes." Peter said quickly, his restlessness latching onto the opportunity. Tony's arms twitched by his sides, as if deciding whether or not to drag Peter back into another hug, "Sorry. That's – yes. I, uh, still want to come tonight, if that's what you were going to –"

"That's exactly what I was going to say." Tony assured just as quickly.

Something cold in Peter's chest began to thaw, settling as it found warmth amongst the veins and vessels of his heart.

The two smiled, tentatively, at each other. Peter hopped from foot to foot, transferring his weight, but his nerves only rose up with the movement. The pressing need to say something was clawing inside his chest until –

"I'm sorry, I was such an idiot." Peter blurted, voice so loud it carried across the auditorium and bounced off the walls. Tony reeled backwards with surprise, bushy eyebrows rocketing towards his hairline. "That argument was so stupid. I was being dumb, and ungrateful, and I never should have spoken to you like that and I'm really, really sorry."

"What, no, Pete –"

But Peter had rediscovered his ability to string together a sentence, and he was on a roll.

"I was such a child that day. I threw a stupid tantrum like a stupid kid and then I didn't want to bother you with any more of my stupid behaviour and then I didn't hear from you so I thought –"

"Kid that's not –"

"- that you didn't want me to come back and that would have made total sense so I just want you to know that I'm really really *really* –"

"Peter, *stop.*" Tony demanded.

Peter's mouth snapped shut. His chin wobbled, and stunned by the abrupt severity in Tony's voice, his chest cracked wide open. The fissures he had been trying to patch all day ran the length of his body, and he splintered so suddenly, tears beginning to streak down his cheeks in earnest.

"I'm sorry." Peter whispered pathetically, taking a step back.

Tony's hand snapped out to grab his wrist, stopping him.

"You don't – there is *absolutely nothing –"* Tony let out a frustrated growl, and Peter tensed. "Screw this. I'm not letting this go on any longer. You're coming with me."

Tony stepped aside, releasing Peter's wrist with a squeeze, and Peter almost asked him not to go.

Wide-eyed and shell-shocked, with a pit in his stomach the size of the Grand Canyon, he watched as Tony stomped up the stairs towards the crowd of lingering high school students, who had obviously been eavesdropping on their conversation. They scattered at Tony's approach – something in the genius' eye causing them to flee towards the open doors with only a quick glance back towards Peter.

Peter hastily smeared away his tears as his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. He did not want his classmates – especially, God forbid, *Flash* – to see him all emotional in front of

Ironman. There were already too many parts of his day he was never going to live down.

He took a few breaths, envisioning the tidal waves beneath his skin returning to the ocean and revisiting only to lap at the shore with gentle caress'. When he no longer felt as though he would upturn his lunch, he turned to see Tony snap a few short sentences at Mr Harrington.

Mr Harrington glanced fretfully at Peter and nodded hastily.

Tony clearly did not see fit to grace Mr Harrington with anything further. He turned on his heel and stalked back to Peter.

"What did you –" Peter look wildly up at his teacher. Was Mr Harrington avoiding his gaze?

"You're excused from the remainder of the field trip."

"How did you –"

"I'm *me*." Tony said shortly, but the fight left him quickly. He gently took Peter's arm, and the fight left Peter too. "Come on kid." Tony murmured, "We gotta talk."

Peter glanced over his shoulder at his classmates, glimpsing Ned at the top of the stairs. He had no time to raise a hand in farewell or shoot a terrified look his friend's way before Tony had led them down the steps and backstage of the auditorium. Peter felt relieved to be out from under the warm lights. The backstage space was far darker and far cooler, and his nerves dived, falling somewhere closer to fatigue.

Tony's hand pressed against the small of Peter's back as they stepped inside a well-hidden elevator.

"The penthouse Friday." Tony instructed.

They catapulted upwards.

They did not speak, and Peter found himself thankful for it. He wasn't sure if he could manage another word. He stretched up on his toes, his calves twitching at the movement, and pretended not to see Tony watching him from the corner of his eye. Cool air blew in front from the vents, and he expelled a breath as it washed over the tear-tracks on his face.

Discomfort and apprehension and a little bit of embarrassment spooled in his limbs, keeping him on edge. The feeling battled with the fatigue settling over his shoulders, inching down his spine.

Tony's appearance at the presentation had thrown him, but the man's direct address had practically *vaulted* him across Manhattan and all the way back to Queens for the shock it had caused. He hadn't believed Steve back in the cafeteria, but seeing Tony's pleading expression, the hope in his eyes, the grin across his face when Peter had asked about what they would be doing tonight…

The warmth in his chest reignited.

And Tony's words on the stairs, right before he had gone to confront Mr Harrington…

*I fucked up. I'm sorry. I want you here.*

And the way Tony had grabbed his wrist when he had become upset, stopped him from stepping away, evidently trying to keep him close and prevent him from leaving…

The flickering flame inside his heart burned brighter, kindled with hope.

Tony wouldn't say all of that, back in the auditorium, and then just… kick him out again, would he? The engineer was many things – genius, billionaire, philanthropist, to name a few – but Peter had never thought him a liar, or a trickster who thought pulling cruel pranks on teenagers he used to mentor was a worthy designation of his time.

He flicked his eyes to Tony, ever so quickly. Not quick enough though. Tony reacted immediately, catching the look. He smiled kindly, gently, though Peter noticed he was tapping his fingers against the side of his thigh. Tony noticed Peter looking, fingers twitching before moving instinctively to settle in the pocket of his jacket.

The elevator slowed, coming to a smooth stop, and the doors slid open to reveal the penthouse. Peter timed his breathing, trying to relax.

Tony took one step forward but did not exit, bracing a hand against the elevator doors to stop them from closing – an unnecessary action when FRIDAY was able to sense where they stood and whether they had exited, but she apparently did not feel the need to sass them at this moment or remind them of her ability to keep the doors open just fine herself.

"We could go to the lab, if you'd prefer," Tony said softly, looking back at Peter, "But I thought…"

*The lab.*

*Where they had argued.*

Peter shook his head.

*Not yet.*

"Here is fine."

Tony's lips twitched, settling in a stretched line – not a smile, but not quite a grimace. Perhaps a simple acknowledgement of Peter's choice not to return to the lab quite yet. He jutted his head lightly to the side, indicating the lounge, and Peter followed a pace behind, stepping out of the elevator and glancing around.

Within seconds, he had ascertained that not one thing in the penthouse had changed (besides the flavour of muffins in the kitchen), and that notion brought immediate and immeasurable relief to Peter's spent senses. Not unlike the realisation that Tony had yet to choose new vendors for the cafeteria, and no decisions had been made on the matter in Peter's absence.

The curved couch, where Pepper had lay reading her legal documents, looked just as plush and inviting as it had that night eight weeks ago. The paintings on the wall still made Peter tense and avoidant, terrified he would somehow damage them (he knew how much they each cost, because Ned had insisted on looking each of them up). The kitchen counter was sparkling and laden with an overflowing fruit bowl and an encased display of muffins, but they were lemon and poppyseed today instead of –

“Drink?” Tony asked, and Peter startled from his observations. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Peter said quickly, giving Tony a tight-lipped smile of reassurance.

Silence descended between them; the air stifled with awkward tension.

“Pete?” Tony prompted again, “Drink?”

“Right. Uh. Juice?”

Tony couldn’t hide his amusement, “Child.”

Peter’s shoulders loosened, the quip shaking a weight from their perch, and he countered, mechanically, with, “Old man.”

Tony shook his head, looking immensely pleased for the teen to be insulting him right now.

“At least I know which wires to connect on a circuit board to power an external sensor.” He snorted, ducking into the kitchen and grabbing a huge carton of apple juice from the fridge. “Come on Pete. That’s second grade shit.”

Peter gaped, stumbling on his way to the kitchen island and turning to stare at Tony in disbelief, “You – how did you –”

Tony pulled out a stool opposite, before pouring Peter an excessively large glass of juice.

“Pepper and Steve weren’t the only ones playing interference today.” He said, pushing the glass across the counter, “FRIDAY made her feelings pretty clear. Brought up some footage of your tour. Called the elevator for me like eight times.”

Peter took the glass with both hands, grumbling, “I would have figured it out, MJ didn’t even give me a second.”

“She gave you at least eight of them.” Tony teased, eyes lingering on Peter’s fringe.

Whilst Peter had been staring at the paintings, Tony had been staring at his intern, inspecting him for any miniscule change and growth, having no idea that was exactly what Peter had been doing too. His curls had grown in the last two months, nesting around his ears. His shoulders looked broader too.

Peter took a long sip of his drink. When he lowered his glass, he peered at Tony, “You knew I was here then?” He asked softly, twisting the glass between his hands, “The whole day?”

Tony nodded, guilt gnawing at his insides like a feral creature. “FRIDAY alerted me, right when you arrived.”

“Traitor.” Peter muttered.

“I was unaware you did not wish for me to inform Mr Stark of your arrival.” FRIDAY’s smooth voice interjected, making Peter startle. Juice sloshed from his glass. Tony was reaching for a cloth before Peter could stammer an apology. “I apologise, Peter.”

“No, no!” Peter said quickly, shooting a guilty look at the ceiling. Tony almost snorted. “It’s not your fault FRIDAY. Sorry. You didn’t do anything wrong. I didn’t mean – sorry.”

“Should I amend the Baby Monitor Protocol, Boss?”

“No.” Tony said sharply. Peter frowned at him. He tossed a checkered cloth Peter’s way. “No thank you. Leave us to it FRIDAY.”

“Understood.”

Peter finished mopping up the sticky remnants of spilt juice. FRIDAY had never registered on his spider-senses. Tony had always been intrigued by that.

“I thought the Baby Monitor protocol was just for Spiderman stuff?”

Tony winced, “I may have included some other things.”

“Such as?”

“Such as, FRIDAY alerting me when you enter the Tower.”

Tony watched Peter’s reaction to this information closely, tensing as he waited, perhaps unfairly, for the annoyance and the accusations to begin – their argument had been about Tony fussing over Peter too much, after all, had come to a head when Peter accused Tony of not trusting him enough, of tracking him too much, not giving him enough privacy.

The teen’s head tilted left to right, a physical, twitching representation of his weighing the admission.

“So, you knew I was here the whole day.” Peter said instead, a tad quieter than before, “I wondered whether scanning my ID card would send some kind of alert, but I guess… I guess I thought that might be because, you know –” Peter swallowed, hard, and Tony watched with bated breath as the boy’s Adam’s apple bobbed.

“Yeah, kid?”

“I thought I might get kicked out.”

Tony’s limbs seized, as though a bucket of freezing water hauled straight from the depths of the arctic ocean had doused him head to toe.

“Get kicked out?” He repeated, dumbstruck.

“For being here.”

“For being here.”

“In the Tower.”

“For being here in the Tower.”

“Are you going to repeat everything I say?” Peter chuckled nervously, scratching the sleeve of his hoodie.

“Until I understand what you’re saying, yeah, probably.”

Peter’s eyes flicked away.

Tony’s heart twisted.

“Kid,” He said quietly, “Did you really think I’d kick you out if you came back?”

Peter shrugged, a dismissive action that neither of them believed. His fingers were doing some bizarre flexing motion, almost as though he was trying to expel his web-fluid. Tony wondered whether that was what the kid was thinking of – escaping on his webs and swinging back to Queens, as far away as possible from Tony and his nonsense.

“Yeah, kind of.”

Tony sucked in a sharp breath between his teeth, the frigid air setting his molars on edge.

*Shit.*

They were silent for a few moments, during which time Tony was scrambling to neutralise the horror on his face and the chaos charging through his mind. He breathed in through his noise and exhaled through his mouth – a tactic Rhodey had taught him back in the day.

Peter continued, just as quietly as before, “I was pretty sure you would have revoked my access, at least, so I was kind of surprised when the lady at front desk had a note on file that I was listed as an employee. Then I just thought you’d forgotten to, uh, do anything about it.”

“No.” Tony shook his head. He stood, shakily, from his seat, and rounded the table. Peter tensed at his approach, and Tony could not think of a single think that had ever made his heart ache like that small action did, “I didn’t forget. I never took away your access to anything. I wouldn’t do that.”

Peter fidgeted, “Why not?”

Tony ignored his thundering heartbeat, and the voice in his head that said, *this is going to go so very badly for you,* and said hoarsely, “Because, kid, I was hoping you’d come back.”

“You were?” Peter’s doe-eyes blew wide, and Tony suppressed the urge the wrap the kid in another hug.

As a general rule, Tony tried to avoid discussions regarding his feelings. Sure, there were some discussions he just couldn’t avoid, like relationship mumbo-jumbo with Pepper. And of course, they’d have semi-one-sided conversations when she cornered him into facing up to what he was feeling – like earlier that day. Those happened more than the former, but over the years he’d maybe got ten per cent better at those conversations – even managed to make his proposal semi-emotional, despite it being on the spot and in front of a room of journalists.

He’d had them with Rhodey, on occasion, stilted as they had been. A few times even with Happy, always in the car with both of them looking dead-ahead like their lives depended on not knowing the expression on the other’s face. Hell, he’d even had one with Capsicle when the Rogues had returned, and it had been so fucking uncomfortable that he’d swiftly sworn to never discuss another feeling with the man ever again.

But this?

This right here with the kid?

This was pretty much a first.

This wasn’t just Tony putting himself on the line, this was a question. This was a, ‘*I feel this way, do you feel the same?’* And whilst he was pretty sure from Peter’s blurted cries of anguish and apology back in the auditorium that the kid *did* in fact feel the same…

It was still a scary fucking question to ask.

“Okay, here goes nothing.” Tony muttered. He planted himself on the stool beside Peter, rolling his shoulders and clicking the crick from his neck as is preparing for a fight.

Peter watched him closely.

*Is he worth it?*

“I care about you.” Tony said bluntly, and Peter’s mouth popped open. “Have for a while. But I’m an ass, and an emotionally-constipated one at that. Our… disagreement, a couple months back, about tracking you and checking up on you and all that jazz. I do that because I care. I put trackers in your suit and I check them way too much because I want to know where you are and if you’re okay. I didn’t mean to make you feel otherwise. I’m terrible at telling someone I care about them so this is the shit I do instead.”

Peter gaped, and Tony saw a sliver of comprehension behind his eyes. A promising start.

The kid tried to interrupt, “I shouldn’t have –”

“Uh, uh, uh!” Tony waved his hands in the air, nervous-energy warping his brain enough that he was scared if he stopped mid-apology, he would chicken out. Peter’s expression contorted as he was silenced. “I know what you’re going to say Underoos, to be frank you said it all

earlier. But you weren't being dumb, or ungrateful, or an idiot. You were being a kid. You think I'd remember that, considering I call you on it all the damn time."

Peter huffed.

"I didn't act like an adult during that conversation, or afterward, and I am sorry for the way I spoke to you. And yeah, I agree our fight was stupid but only because it should have never gone that far. I should have been honest and told you why I put that stuff in your suit and why I act the way I do sometimes."

Tony let out a huge breath. A weight the size and mass of DUM-E lifted from this chest, the tension that had been ever-growing these past eight weeks becoming lighter, easier to carrier, but not yet entirely gone.

Peter's hands were clamped on his jeans, and when he spoke it was on the edge of a breath, whispered into the air between them like a secret, "I deserved it. The way you spoke to me."

It was a secret Tony did not wish to hear.

"You did *not.*" Tony retorted swiftly, sharp as the edge of a knife. "Don't ever say that."

"But –"

"Peter."

"I just meant –"

"I know exactly what you meant." Tony's tone had not lost its sourness, but he forcibly swallowed past the bitterness as Peter's eyes filled with watery pleading, "Peter. Kid. *Underoos.* You do not ever, *ever*, deserve to be spoken to that way. By me, by anyone. *Ever.* I am apologising because speaking to you that way was me *fucking up*, and you deserve an apology for what was extraordinarily bad behaviour on my part. I am sorry. I want you to know I am sorry, and that I won't do it again."

He watched Peter war with this apology, his lips puckered, his brows drawn. As if facing the prospect of defeat, the young boy's shoulders slumped. He shifted awkwardly on his stool, and Tony wondered what self-degrading thoughts were running through his mind.

God, this kid was way too much like him.

Peter opened his mouth, closed it, scrunched his eyes shut.

Tony waited.

He hated waiting.

"I didn't realise that's why you did all that stuff." The kid murmured.

"I should have told you." Tony faltered, before leaning forward and placing a hand on Peter's knee.

Peter eyed him upsettingly. His features were twisted, and his waterline was distinctly wet, “I just thought it was cause you didn’t trust me.”

“I do trust you Pete. You’re so good and you help so many people.”

“I’m such an idiot.” Peter scrunched his eyes shut again, a pained expression marring his young face.

“Well, I think we may both be entitled to that title.” Tony laughed lightly, trying to diffuse some of the heaviness weighing down the air between them. His heart soared when Peter huffed something close a laugh in return, his lips ticking upwards. “Me way more so than you, though. Still the adult. Forget I have to act that way sometimes.” He squeezed Peter’s knee, “I’m really sorry kid.”

His stomach tightened as Peter nodded, but he waited patiently for the kid’s response. He was barely refraining from tapping his fingers against his leg, desperate to let loose his anxiety with the well-worn tic and an unsteady pattern. His heartbeat felt too loud, and there was a burning in his throat as if he’d swallowed half the Sahara.

This was going okay so far, right? He had apologised, he had told Peter he cared for him, the kid hadn’t run away screaming. He had told the kid he trusted him, gone over the details over their fight, tried to explain himself. It was everything he’d come up with on the elevator ride down to the auditorium.

“I was… pretty upset, after our fight.” Peter finally said, voice barely above a whisper, and Tony resisted his need to interrupt, to try *fix* for one second, and let Peter talk. “But the thing that really hurt was…” Peter swallowed. Tony kept his hand on Peter’s knee, biting his tongue until the nip caused a metallic twang to coat his tastebuds. “I thought… you didn’t want to see me anymore. That maybe, you didn’t think I was worth your time.”

“Oh, Roo…” Tony bowed his head, shame washing over him.

“Why didn’t you text, or call or anything, if you wanted me to come back?”

Peter’s doe-like eyes were going to be the death of him. As soon as he looked up, they pierced Tony’s soul and induced the kind of self-loathing the engineer had felt on and off for most of his life.

The only times it had been as strong as he felt now though, looking at Peter, it’d usually had something to do with Howard Stark.

He supposed it did this time, too.

*Damn you, Pepper.*

“I thought I was giving you the space you wanted,” Tony explained. He removed his hand from Peter’s knees and straightened his spine. He hated these stools; he needed to get them replaced by something with back support. He twisted slightly in his seat, and his knee

brushed back against Peter's. Peter stared down at it. "I thought I was respecting your decision to stay away from me."

"But I didn't want to stay away. Not really."

"Ah, and here lies a mistake we both seem to have made." Tony tried to joke. It fell flat. He sighed, a noise of deep remorse that caused his chest to shudder. "You thought I was mad at you, and I thought you were mad at me. As the adult, I should have jumped first and texted you anyway, at least to make sure you were okay. I was petty and stubborn and didn't. That's on me."

Peter sighed too, hands having returned to twist at his jeans.

Tony stared at the young vigilante - this boyish, brave, pop-culture-referencing, smart yet ridiculous kid who had ended up in his life. The light had dimmed slightly in the penthouse, stray dust particles illuminated in golden rays, and a shadow was cast over Peter's face as the boy looked down at their knees. His curls flopped around his ears, his t-shirt was emblazoned with a science pun, one of his shoelaces had come undone, and there was a small, reddish mark on his jeans Tony hoped was kool-aid but more worryingly might have been blood.

Tony took it all in.

*Is Peter worth it?*

He went on.

"I never, *ever* meant for you to believe you'd ever be turned away from the Tower, or that you were unwelcome. That you thought that…" Tony stomach clenched, picturing Peter sat on his bed in that tiny flat the Parker's rented, thinking Tony didn't want him. "I can't tell you how sorry I am, and I want to get better at these conversations, so it doesn't happen again."

Peter shrugged, his arm twitching with the movement, but not enough to dislodge Tony's fingers, which had reached out and wrapped around his wrist, "You're doing pretty good."

Tony squeezed, swiping his thumb across the sliver of skin underneath the fraying sleeve of Peter's hoodie, "Thanks kid, but you shouldn't let me off so easy. Truth is…"

His throat closed up, but Pepper's voice came back to him.

*Push past the voice in your head that sounds like your father*.

Tony swallowed the terror in his throat, clenching his jaw so it didn't come rushing back up. He wanted desperately to make a joke. He wanted to say something stupid and deflect from how goddamn hard it was to put all his emotions on the firing line, but he forced himself into seriousness.

"The truth is I care about you, and I was maybe a little scared you didn't feel the same, especially after our argument. Ignoring the whole situation felt safer than confronting it. I

won't make that mistake again, because I definitely don't want you to stay away. I want to do better by you. If you'll let me."

And there it was.

*I feel this way, do you feel the same?*

The scary fucking question he'd needed to ask.

*If you'll let me.*

Because whatever happened next would be Peter's choice, and Peter could just as easily walk out of this penthouse and never look back. He could choose to not forgive Tony. He could decide that Tony's apology was not good enough and that would be –

Tony wasn't sure what that would be.

Pretty fucking devastating, if he wagered a guess.

And he'd have to hide it, which would be almost impossible after all the crap he'd spouted down on the thirtieth floor. The rest of the team would never let him live it down. He could hear them now, *Tony Stark has emotions; Tony Stark has a heart; Tony Stark got turned down by a fifteen-year-old –*

"Tony?"

Tony's stomach seized, tangling in knots he knew he would never be able to fully undo.

"Yeah kid?" Tony's response was barely a breath.

He still had his fingers encircling Peter's wrist and so, unable to tap his fingers against his thigh as he usually would in a situation that was causing him so much anxiety, he thought his watch would start blaring heart-related-warnings, he moved his thumb up and down Peter's skin, in a display of affection he hoped was comforting rather than invasive.

As Tony's heart pounded, Peter raised his chin. His mouth pulled down in a frown, he looked Tony in the eye, and asked a question Tony hadn't been expecting to hear.

"What's vibranium status?"

# Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I lied. This isn't the last chapter. Whoops?

I wrote the chapter and kept adding, and adding, and it ended up around 10,000 words long, so I am splitting it into three. The fic could be ended here, so the next two chapters could be seen as epilogues - one the following Monday, when Peter goes back to the school, and the final, proper epilogue as the final chapter :D

So this chapter is a little shorter, but chapter eight will be more than double the length :)

Enjoy!

Tony's mouth opened and closed, glubbing like a goldfish. Perhaps he had been expecting Peter to say something else (likely, given Tony had just finished a long, well-thought-out speech containing a multitude of apologies and wishes and insights), or perhaps he was put on the spot by Peter's question.

"Vibranium status." Tony repeated, blinking at Peter.

"It was something FRIDAY said when I entered the Tower." Peter clarified, shifting on his seat, and feeling a little guilty for diverting the conversation, "I'd never heard it before. Is it new? Is it… something to do with our fight, or me not being here for a while?"

"No, nothing like that." Tony shook his head. He reached up to scratch the back of his neck, looking a little awkward as he admitted, "It's your access code, within the Tower. Everyone's status determines how much access they have, and where to."

Peter blinked back, "Oh."

Tony nodded solemnly. A few different emotions flashed across his face, before he said, casually, "Actually, I changed your status. At Christmas."

"You did?"

"Yep. I'm surprised you didn't notice, it's on your ID card. I swapped it out." Tony reached forward and tugged on the lanyard peeking out from Peter's hoodie. "Then again, when you came to the Tower on Friday's you were either with Happy and coming up the private entrance, or you swung and entered through a window. FRIDAY wasn't exactly announcing your status whilst you creepy-crawlied down my walls."

"What was it before Christmas?"

“Your access? Gold.”

“Which meant?”

“Uh, allowed you most places, all the research and development labs and such, but you needed myself or Happy or Pepper to let you up here to the penthouse and my labs.” Peter eyed Tony, his heartbeat a steady drum beneath his chest. He inched forward, and the engineer rolled his eyes, “Go on kid, you can ask.”

“Tony… what does vibranium status mean?”

Tony blew out a breath, lacing his hands together in his lap, “It means total access Pete. No holds barred. You can go onto any floor, into any room, all the way up here to my private floors and labs, even when I’m not with you. Tower’s basically your playhouse.”

The revelation clanged through Peter’s body like nothing he’d ever experienced – the closest may have been that time he’d caught a car with his bare hands and felt the reverberations of its impact strum every sinew in his body, or when he’d hit the sand beachside after being thrown by the Vulture and the collision had rendered him unable to move for failure to catch his breath.

He’d had total access to one of the world’s most illustrious headquarters for *months* and he hadn’t even known it – a building that housed superheroes and super-soldiers, a company that housed technological secrets coveted across the globe, a hotspot of brilliance and genius and secrets belonging to spies and SHIELD operatives.

Him. Peter Parker. Teenage nerd from Queens.

“But I’m fifteen.” Peter blurted, feeling entirely out of his league.

Tony chuckled, “Yeah Pete, I know that.”

“Why would you –”

“I wanted to make sure you could always get here.” Tony shrugged, “One night I had this image of you going round in my head, you know, wanting to come by after school, or being injured Spider-manning, or needing somewhere safe to go – and I was away and Happy wasn’t here, and you couldn’t get in. I didn’t like that image.”

Peter zeroed in on Tony’s feigned nonchalance, sucking in a breath that stuck like pins and needles in his lungs, “Tony?”

“Hm?”

“Who… Who else has Vibranium Status?”

Tony’s smile grew soft, “Ah, we’ve arrived at the million-dollar question,” He joked, but Peter could have seen his discomfort from a mile away, “Not many, would be the answer.”

“How many?”

“Me, obviously. Pepper, Happy, and Rhodey.”

“Who else?”

Tony stared at him, “You.”

Peter’s throat closed up, “Who else?”

“That’s it.”

“That’s – What do you mean?”

“Peter…” Tony stood at that point, pushing his stool back beneath the island counter and heaving a sigh. He planted both hands on Peter’s shoulders and waited until Peter had wrangled his short-circuiting brain enough to look up into Tony’s kind eyes, “That’s it.”

“But – what about, Dr Banner, or, or, Mr Rogers –”

“Nope.”

“But what about –”

“Kid.” Tony’s voice had gone devastatingly gentle, his thumbs drawing calming circles on Peter’s shoulders, “The only people who are given vibranium status,” Tony paused here, swallowing like it caused him pain, and something about that reaction caused tears to prick at Peter’s eyes, “Are the ones I consider family.”

Peter sucked in a breath so quickly, he almost choked on the air.

“That’s why I am so mad at myself for letting you stay away two whole months. I should have come to check on you, should have called. Family doesn’t give up on each other, ever.”

Peter’s stomach did a somersault.

Family.

He stared up at Tony in disbelieving wonder, taking in every detail of the man’s face – not just the scruff of his stubble this time, but the tenderness etched into the creases by his eyes, the flicker in his jaw as he searched Peter’s face for clues and reactions, the pursing of his lips betraying his nervousness.

“You… really think of me that way?” Peter whispered, voice breaking as a tear dripped down his cheek.

One of Tony’s hands clamped down on Peter’s shoulder, but the other reached up and stroked his chin, wiping away the tear, “Yeah kid, I do. I’m sorry it took me this long to tell you.”

And that was it.

Peter practically scrambled into Tony's arms, almost knocking the man down with his speed and force. Tony laughed, thrilled and surprised, throwing his arms out to grab Peter and tug him close even as he stumbled back a few steps, running a hand through the super-teen's brown curls. Peter held onto that hug, that *moment*, for dear life, his fatigue dismantled, tears of relief and joy and *belonging* – the good kind of tears – slipping down his face but caught by Tony's shoulder.

Christmas. Tony had felt this way about him at *Christmas.*

It was this seemingly insignificant tidbit of information that flooded Peter's brain, cementing in every molecule of his being that Tony truly meant what he said. It washed over in him in forceful waves, fuelling his strength, making him dizzy, causing him to tighten his grip around his mentor and tuck his head further in Tony's neck with a shiver and a barely-held-back sob.

Because with his vibranium status came the knowledge that Tony's admission of care backdated their fight – that he had changed Peter's status between Friday nights in the lab and movie nights in the penthouse, when everything had been fine between them, and ergo, Tony wasn't just saying this to help speed their reconciliation.

It was an unkind thought, and whilst Peter wouldn't have wanted to think it, there was a niggle in the back of his mind – a scared, guilt-stricken fear that he'd have worried about it, that he'd have wondered if it was all real or just for show should the change had been made during their estrangement.

With that fear removed, and with the dropping of that barrier, Peter let his guard well and truly down. The two of them stood there, wrapped in each other's arms, for a long, long time. Afterwards, when Peter's tears had ceased and his breathing had returned to normal, he peeled himself from Tony's embrace and let the engineer wipe his cheeks with soft strokes of his thumb.

Peter had his say, made his own apologies, promised to behave better and trust that Tony had trust in him. He would allow Tony to continue monitoring his patrols through KAREN and FRIDAY and not get mad about it, which was easy now he knew the real reason behind the checks (Tony had let out a relieved breath at this acquiescence, which made Peter's heart both hurt and soar).

They returned to the scene of the crime, Tony hesitantly pushing the door to the lab open for Peter to walk in first, and Peter felt wracked with nerves until he'd saw every inch of his workstation laid out exactly as it had been that night. In fact, it was the only tidy spot in the whole lab. Tony hastily tried to clean up, but Peter couldn't have cared less. He only had eyes for his station – somehow, it was free of dust, despite nothing having been touched in two months. Curious.

They got to work right away.

After about an hour of tinkering, of loud music and loud ideas that made Peter feel like he'd never been gone, the two of them were interrupted by a knock at the door.

They whirled around in perfect synchronization, which only made Pepper, Rhodey, and Steve, grin at them wider.

“If you’d like to thank us,” Rhodey drawled, the beginnings of a smirk dancing on his lips, “Now would be a good time.”

“Get out platypus, before I throw a wrench at your head.”

Pepper strode into the lab despite the threat, wrapping her arms around Peter in a loose hug, encasing him in the smell of her perfume, “I’m glad you’re back sweetheart, he’s just not the same without you.” She whispered quietly.

“Uh, thanks Pepper.” Peter mumbled, shy, but still hanging onto her hug a few seconds more, “And thanks for you know, the field trip, and the presentation and everything. My classmates had a really good time.”

Pepper smiled, cupping his cheek as they pulled away, “Anything for family.”

Peter blushed from the tips of his ears to the soles of his feet, a beet redness that Tony asked FRIDAY to replicate and use as the base colour for his next Ironman suit.

“Speaking of your classmates,” Steve said from the doorway, “We gotta talk about that Flash kid.”

Tony pointed the wrench at Peter, “Yeah, that little shit ain’t having an internship I can tell you that right now. How long has he been after you? Need me to come down to the school? I’ll do it. I’ll bring Natasha. We’ll suit up.”

“You will *not*.”

“Pep, honey, don’t ruin the fun.”

Basking in the glow of their reconciliation, Peter stayed for dinner that evening, the lab time having relaxed both science-minded-idiots (Rhodey’s words) back to their easy, bantering comradery almost entirely.

They were joined by other members of the Avengers, who all teased Peter about how uncomfortable he’d been at the presentation, but each of them chose not to mention his two-month sabbatical (apart from the odd, quiet comment that it was good to see him, and that he’d been missed, and could he please do his thing and help deflate Tony’s ego because it had grown too large for them all to handle).

Afterwards, instead of asking Happy, Tony drove Peter home himself, walking him up the many flights of stairs and asking to speak with May if she was home.

“Uh,” Peter hesitated, staring at the keyhole, “I’m not sure if that’s a good idea.”

Tony raised a brow, “And why is that?”

“She, um, hasn’t been very pleased with you the past few weeks. She noticed I wasn’t going to the Tower anymore and…” Peter trailed off, shrugging with unconvincing indifference.

“Deserved.” Tony reached over Peter’s shoulder and rapped three times on the door.

Peter rolled his eyes, “I have my key, Tony, you didn’t need to –”

The door swung open.

Tony had forgotten how terrifying May Parker was. He froze up, mouth open on an undecided greeting.

Peter snorted, pushing past them both and muttering a smug, “I told you so”.

Thankfully, they worked it all out. Tony asked Peter to give him a minute with May, a reassuring smile plastered on his face, almost akin to his television-interview smile but with a crookedness that made it feel more genuine.

Peter knew Tony asked for privacy so May could fully vent whatever grievances she had with the genius, but even from his bedroom Peter could listen with ease (because of his super-hearing, not because his ear was pressed against the door) as Tony rambled a condensed version of his apology at Aunt May.

“I know I fucked up, but I promise you, I care about that kid so much. I want to do right by him.” There was a pause, a long one. Peter hopped from foot to foot, apprehension curling in his belly. “I want him in my life May. If you’ll let me. Please.”

Another pause, a suffocating one. Peter held his breath, screwed his eyes shut, and crossed his fingers behind his back.

“You really hurt him, Tony.” Came the disheartened response.

“I know.” Came Tony’s miserable answer.

“You can’t do that again.”

“I won’t.”

“It’s my job to look after him, I can’t have him around people who hurt him.”

“I completely understand.”

“Do you? Because if that shit happens even one more time, it’s game over.”

“I do. I promise.”

And May had relented – thank God.

Thank Tony.

Thank *Pepper*, really, but Peter and Tony had agreed not to tell her that, lest her warpath of interference continued its reach and invaded other aspects of their lives (it was too late for Tony, but he could try and save Peter). Tony said thanking Steve was out of the question (but Peter noticed the billionaire fetching the super-soldier a beer without being asked one night a few weeks later, clinking their drinks together in a cheers, and smiled to himself).

May disappeared into her bedroom when it came time for Tony to leave that night, a knowing smile stretching her lips as she kissed the side of Peter's head. She dipped her chin at Tony once, and Peter knew the engineer had not been entirely forgiven, but they were on the right path.

The determined look in Tony's eyes said it was a challenge he welcomed.

Peter walked Tony from the living room to the front door, all ten feet of it, dragging his feet slightly. He was exhausted, the kind of fatigue that settled deep in his bones and made each step feel a mile long, and yet, he did not want this day to end.

And despite everything they had shared that day and despite all the words of encouragement and care, his voice still hitched when they came to the door and he asked, "So… I guess, I'll see you next Friday?" Then hurried to add, "If you want. If that still works. Don't worry if you're busy. Your schedule probably changed and everything –"

Tony had just stepped over the threshold. He spun slowly on his heel, tutting and shaking his head, "No, I don't think that'll do." Peter's stomach lurched. Fear threatened to close his throat. "Does May still work the late shift on Mondays?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"So you'd be home alone?"

"Well, yeah but that's normal –"

"Wanna come to the Tower instead?"

Peter would later blame his anxious energy for the delighted giggle that came out of his mouth, excitement bursting like a firework in his chest. Tony laughed, bending a tad at his waist, clearly pleased and entertained by the reaction. Peter grinned, "Really?"

Tony stretched out his arms and Peter stepped into the hug, his spine relaxing as Tony's warm hands carded through the curls at the back of his head, cradling his skull. He could have stayed there forever, his cheek resting on Tony's shoulder, his arms wrapped around Tony's waist and back, his body practically melting like butter in the sun.

"I'm really glad we're okay kid." The genius whispered against his hair.

"Me too. I missed you." Peter mumbled back.

"I missed you Roo. I'm gonna make all this up to you, I swear it."

Tony gave him a last squeeze and a sweeping look before climbing down the stairs to the street, and Peter dashed inside the apartment to watch, from the window, as Tony ducked inside his Audi, and pulled into Queens traffic. Peter stared at the taillights until the 'STARK 8' number plate turned a corner and disappeared out of sight.

"Well," May deadpanned from behind him. Peter started, spinning to find her leaning against her bedroom door, one eyebrow raised, "Looks like we have some catching up to do. Good field trip?"

Peter grinned from ear to ear, his heart fit to burst, and collapsed into his favourite seat, "The *best*."

# Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I swear to God, this is the last time I'm going to add more chapters to the chapter count.

This fic will be ten chapters long - they're already written out, I just have to edit them. I do have a lot going on this week but I'll try my best to update soon.

As before, if you have any twists to the field trip trope you would like to see, or other Irondad/Spiderson prompts you'd be interested to read, please leave a review and let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

School the following Monday was an unpleasant affair.

In Peter's opinion, it was cosmic retribution. He'd been on cloud nine all weekend, floating and skipping and jumping around the apartment until, for the first time *ever*, May had suggested he go out and patrol, just to get him out of her hair for a few hours.

In contrast, arriving at Midtown on Monday morning felt like being squeezed through a thin tube, his gut clenched, and his lungs squashed in an ever-tightening vice as student upon student he had never met and never spoken to suddenly showed great interest in him, smiling, waving, excitedly greeting him with a 'Hey Peter, I heard about your internship with Tony Stark, you think you could get me one too?' as he scurried by.

Ned lapped up the attention, at least to begin with, whilst Peter wanted nothing more than to don his suit and activate stealth mode, fading to where he was most comfortable – the background.

Hence, he said, cosmic retribution, or an aggressive show of karma – as if the Universe was handing him a weighted scale with Tony on one side and the population of Midtown High on the other. As his knees buckled beneath the weight and he aimed a helpless, pleading look toward the sky, the cosmos merely shrugged its shoulders and said, 'well, what did you expect? We can't let you be that happy *all* the time.'

MJ rolled her eyes at him.

"I hate this." Peter grumbled, hitching his backpack up his shoulder as they strode to Mr Harrington's class for their final lesson of the day. He'd hidden in the library for lunch, and spent gym class running faster than he had ever dared without his Spiderman mask on, pumping his legs every time someone caught his pace and opened their mouth with 'So I heard about the field trip'.

“It might not be so bad.” Ned said lightly, a bounce to his steps.

MJ pushed open the door to the class, and eight people yelled, “Peter!” in unison.

“I’m leaving.” Peter declared.

Ned shoved him forwards.

The two of them had barely reached their seats before their desk was surrounded by classmates who had attended the field trip – not those he knew from the academic decathlon team, like Abe and Betty, but instead those he had barely ever spoke to, and almost exclusively those who had jeered and laughed when he had been bullied.

Those he knew weren’t his friends.

Students slipped off their seats like *they w*ere in stealth mode, approaching him with wide smiles and quick feet, clasping onto the edge of their desk – his side and Ned’s – and jutting others out of the way with their hips, sending daunting, formidable looks to ward off anyone who dared to push in.

Peter threw MJ a pleading glance over the heads of the intruders. MJ tore a piece of paper from her notebook, scrawled a few words down, and held up the makeshift sign.

It read, ‘*Sucks to be you Parker’*.

Peter reluctantly faced the horde, planning to, nicely, ask them to leave him be.

They all spoke at once.

“My parents just couldn’t believe it when I told them –”

“I mean obviously you’re the whole reason we got to talk to the Avengers, that was insanely –”

“And your internship? With Tony Stark himself? How the hell did you –”

“We all saw him hug you –”

“I get that nothing will be set in stone yet but if the summer programme does go ahead do you think you could recommend –”

“Did you like, get to stay after we all left? Have you ever stayed the night –”

“What’s Captain America like, one to one? Or Black Widow? Or –”

Bombarded, Peter’s eyes jumped wildly from classmate to classmate, their voices overlapping into a cacophony of static noise that his ears could no longer compute. Sweat began to dribble down his forehead, and his skull tightened, as if a migraine were beginning – or, a sensory overload. Ned was flapping his hands, trying to get everyone to be quiet or take turns or *something*. MJ had even half-risen from her seat, her mocking sign forgotten. Peter

could just about see her mop of tangled curls over the crowd, her brow scrunched down in displeasure and… maybe even worry.

His other classes had been uncomfortable. A few people here and there sidling up to him to press for details, and the stares of the many lining the corridors. It had all made his skin prickle with unease, enough that he hid between stacks of books at lunchtime, dreading that others would take the time as opportunity to harass him, without fear of interrupting a lesson.

That had been nothing like this.

This was something else entirely.

This felt like an ambush.

A noise like a snapping pencil whipped through the air.

Everyone flinched, their mouths snapping shut.

Peter stared down at the broken pencil in his hand, the other half clattering out of his grip and dropping beneath his seat.

He watched it spin on its axle, and hit the ground, unmoving.

"Uh," He swallowed, head pounding, as everyone blinked at him, "I'm glad you all liked the field trip. I can't tell you much else. Non-disclosure agreement and all. Sorry."

A sea of mouths opened wide; their inhales synchronized. It was as though the serpentine-monster with many heads – the Hydra, ironically, whose name the terrorist organization the Avengers had spent years dismantling had taken as their alias – had escaped their textbooks on Greek Mythology and slithered into seventh period, ready to bite his head and his hand off. Rows upon rows of teeth blinded him, ready to demand recommendations and references and answers and internships and the contact details of high-level researchers –

"Everyone take their seats please! Sorry I'm a few minutes late." Mr Harrington swept into the room, the bang of his laptop bag on his desk a final, deafening end to the ambush.

Peter released a long exhale.

*Thank God,* he thought*, for Mr Harrington.* Then, realising the entire ambush could have been avoided if Mr Harrington had not been late in the first place, mentally retracted his thanks.

The intruders groaned, slinking off to their seats with disappointed glances and hopeful murmurs of, "Talk to you after class Peter!" thrown over their shoulders.

Ned bumped their shoulders together, breathing a soft, "You okay?"

Peter winced, but gave his best friend one, feeble thumbs up in response.

Ned frowned; his early enthusiasm sapped in the wake of their classmate's behaviour.

Peter had nothing more reassuring to offer.

He had known things would change at Midtown, had known it the second Dr Kobayashi had clapped his hands together and said, *"Sorry Peter, did you need something for Dr Stark?"* He had even suspected he might walk out of the field trip more popular than when he walked in, when they had cheered for him during the question-and-answer session, but it had not felt... insidious, then.

Besides that, Tony had made many a comment on the tribulations of fame and fake friendships, too many for Peter to not at least *suspect* that things would change once his classmates knew of his… superhero acquaintances.

Still, he had been able to dismiss the thought the past three days, had quite frankly been too busy living in the clouds, bursting with joy because Tony had text to check he got home safely after his patrol, to truly think on the social implications.

But now – the words that had been whispered in the SI cafeteria, when Steve had arrived… the image of his classmates' necks, swinging left to right, as they looked at Tony, then Peter, then Tony, then Peter… the looks on their faces when Tony called him '*kid'*… Flash's whimper when Natasha had revealed Peter was Tony's *personal* intern… it was all on loop in his mind, going around and around and around and around –

The bell shrieked.

Peter shot bolt upright, unwinding like a spring set to snap.

It had been an hour.

Class was over.

He spun to Ned, "Quickly!" He hissed, and Ned, thankfully, caught on immediately. Classmates were already tipping their heads in their direction, shifting their stance to face his way.

Peter and Ned stuffed their books into their bags as fast as they could, with a ferocity that could have been described as feral, and hightailed it towards the door. Peter waved frantically at MJ, who was leisurely sliding her own books into the satchel she had taken to using recently. Peter glanced her sketchbook, splayed open, displaying a portrait that looked distinctly like himself.

He didn't have the time to look twice.

People called after them - *him*.

Peter ignored them, wincing, hurrying down the corridor with Ned at his back.

It wasn't his style. It felt rude.

He did it anyway.

Students burst out of their classes up ahead, and the corridor was suddenly teaming with life and chatter and shouts and noise and the *pat, pat, pat* of feet, all ambling in the same direction. Students pressed in on all sides and they were lost in the crowd, nothing more than bodies in a race to freedom. Peter ducked his head, snatching up the hood of his sweater so it draped over his forehead, and let the current drag him away.

They reached the exit.

Stepping outside felt like escape, like liberty, and Peter could have sworn the air of Queens had never smelt so good – an amalgamation of spring flowers and warm concrete and bellowing exhaust pipes and the faint stench of gym socks. Peter didn't hate it.

"Dude… that… was… ridiculous!" Ned panted, dragging Peter sideways, out of the way of the hustle and bustle of students yet to reach their freedom, bending over double at the top of the school steps to catch his breath.

Peter didn't respond at first. Students were still pouring out of the school, but the amble had slowed considerably. The later students were having to budge and inch and shove, because those in front had come practically to a standstill. A great crowd had begun to form in front of the school, students barely moving their feet, as if they didn't want to leave.

But that would be absurd. What could ever insight a teenager to stay at school longer than –

"No, Ned," Peter said slowly, eyes landing on the cause of the disturbance, "*That's* ridiculous."

Ned raised his head, cheeks still tinged with exertion, "What do you mean?"

Peter pointed over the crowd.

Ned puffed out a resigned breath, the protesting noise pulled straight from his lungs as his spine straightened. He craned his neck to look over the sophomores obstructing the view down towards the parking lot. His mouth hit the floor.

"Well," His best friend squeaked, "I suppose that's one way to make it up to you."

Peter grunted, the panic in chest beginning to unravel.

The sleek, silver Audi, whose smooth engine Peter could have distinguished from a line-up of hundreds of cars, and whose ultra-expensive-custom-paint was shimmering with enough reflective light to blind a passing child, was not first in the line for school pick-up, nor second, nor third, but it was on the first row, parked up to the pavement directly outside the school.

More importantly, Happy was not at the wheel, as Peter assumed he would be. The driver's seat was, in fact, empty.

Clearly no one had taught Tony Stark the rules of a school pick-up/drop-off lane.

From the looks of things, no student had dared yet approach the genius-billionaire-former-playboy-philanthropist. And Tony, for his part, seemed utterly unfazed by the two hundred high-school students either dragging their feet to get a longer look at him, or pretending to be having a terribly important discussion with a friend as an excuse to stand nearby, or just outright staring. Tapping idly on his phone, his back leant against the Audi, Tony painted the picture of indifference as he loitered in their midst. This could have been the Tower or the Compound or the White House or the Raft, for all he seemed to care.

“Did you know he was coming?” Ned whispered furtively.

“Nope.” Peter popped the ‘p’, focus trained on Tony.

“Were you meant to be seeing him today?”

“Yep.”

“So now you have to –”

“Seems like it.”

“In front of the whole –”

“That’s correct Ned.” Peter breathed low in his chest, sparing a glance towards the school entrance. Students were still trickling out, not realising the reason for the hold-up until they’d pushed past the first few rows of stood-still-sophomores, annoyed and grumbling, and then they themselves joined the crowd in sheer, paralyzing shock.

Tony still hadn’t looked up, absentmindedly tapping away like he had nowhere else more important to be and nothing currently worthy of his attention.

“You want my advice?” Ned said, an edge of determination sharpening the question.

Peter raised his eyebrows. The tone was one he had never heard from Ned’s lips.

“Shoot.”

“Own it.”

Peter shot Ned an incredulous look, but Ned stared back, dead-serious, “You’re *kidding* right.”

The faint buzz of sensory overload was humming beneath Peter’s skin, a distinct whine and whirr that clung to his every breath and shudder, but surprise was permeating the buzz.

“Dude,” Ned’s voice was low but firm, “Think about it. This attention isn’t going to go away. You’ve shoved your head down all day, and yeah, no one should have bombarded you like that in Harrington’s class, but this *isn’t going to go away*, not until you start acting like it’s *normal*. Because then *they’ll* start acting like it’s normal.”

“Dork’s right.”

Peter whipped backwards so rapidly, his neck cricked, “Jesus, MJ. Where did you come from?”

He wondered why his senses had not alerted him of her appearance, stilling for a moment but finding the compulsions still racing through him – awareness of more bodies on his left side than his right, the tremble of shifting feet coursing up his calves, a few hundred voices pricking pins in his eardrums.

MJ shrugged, “Too much happened on that field trip. You’re on a first name basis with the Avengers and you were hugged by Ironman. You’ve been elevated to certified *cool* status. You gotta own it. Become untouchable, then they might actually leave you be.”

Peter tried, but he couldn’t think of a better idea.

He rotated, his senses darting through the crowd until they found…

Peace.

He blinked, the weak hum of low-level danger no longer beating beneath his skull.

Concentrating, he threw out his power more purposefully, navigating that omnipresent tingle inside his mind, trying to authenticate why the hum felt so loud here, but so quiet out there. Testing, probing, scanning. His senses ran like live wires under the ambling masses, and as they found open space, where whispers and murmurs were furtive, and a superhero loitered like he had nowhere better to be…

There.

Peace, quiet and calm, about eighty yards ahead. An eye in the storm. It was like watching the rainfall from behind the window of your bedroom – warm, thankful, *safe*.

Tony.

“Okay.” Peter said, because now his senses felt like warm hands on his back, pressing gently, though enough that his feet itched to move in Tony’s direction.

The agreement clearly caught Ned off guard, but he beamed in response. Peter was almost insulted. Or, he would be, if he didn’t completely understand Ned’s surprise. Peter wasn’t exactly a front-and-centre kind of guy.

MJ, as always, did not react.

Peter tilted his head, assessing the distance between where they stood and where Tony waited. “Do you guys want to, uh, come with?”

“To meet Ironman?” Ned gasped, backpack dropping down his arm and bunching the sleeve of his MIT sweatshirt, a gift from his elder cousin. “Are you serious? Hell yeah!”

“Ned, chill, you saw him three days ago.”

“Yeah, but that was from a *distance*.”

Peter laughed, the sound akin to a healing balm straight from Dr Cho’s lab. For all the years they had been friends, Peter had never grown tired of Ned’s enthusiasm and promised himself there and then he never would.

He glanced at MJ, “Does it still counting as *owning it*, if my friends come along for back-up?”

“Nothing uncool about back-up.” MJ raised a brow. “After you Parker.”

Peter looked between the two of them, his knees a little weak, but gratitude coursing in his veins.

His friends were fucking awesome.

“Alright then.” Peter steeled himself, assessing the Midtown entrance like it was a battlefield. “Let’s go.”

Together, they picked their way through the stationary students lurking and lingering in groups beside them. Peter led, using his senses to find gaps in the crowd, with Ned right behind, and MJ bringing up the rear.

Since they had exited the school, there had been a modicum of chatter and noise amidst the crowd. His schoolmates at least had the decency to *attempt* fake conversations, in order to justifying their motionless feet and their blatant staring. But there had been too many ‘ums’ and ‘uh, what do you think’s’, betraying a lack of substance in their discussions. There was a lack of focus on one’s companion, eyes darting repeatedly to the side. Not to mention the faux giggles that easily exposed the sham, pitched too high and splitting the air with artificiality.

The second Peter’s foot pressed down onto the first, concrete step that would lead him towards Tony, the rustling and shuffling and murmuring went breathy, just for a second, with kids of all ages elbowing friends to point their way.

Then it rose.

Whispers became shriller. Murmurs became sharp. Shuffles became sweeping.

Now, the chatter felt real. It was aimed, focused, purposeful.

It was pointed at them.

Him.

*“Look! It’s Parker.”*

*“Holy shit. The rumours weren’t actually true, were they?”*

*“I thought for sure that freshman kid was lying.”*

*"Nah, Flash Thompson's the liar. He told me Parker was faking the internship."*

*"Wait, that's how his class got the field trip to Stark Industries?"*

*"Shit, I wanna be in Parker's class. That's almost worth falling back and repeating junior year all over again. Imagine all the perks they're gonna get, the foot-up on internship opportunities."*

*"Lucky bastard."*

*"Think he needs another friend? Or a tutor? Or a bodyguard?"*

Peter's foot hit the bottom step and he sprung forwards, ready to jog the last few dozen yards to Tony, until a hand shot out from the crowd and tried to grab his wrist. His instincts were electricity, hot to the touch and dancing through his body. He spun sideways, then backwards, haphazardly and unknowing knocking straight into Ned, who '*oof*'ed, but shot his hands out and managed to steady them both.

"Hey Peter!" A girl from his history class smiled insipidly, arm still outstretched. Her eyes danced over his shoulder. To the Audi. To Tony. "I'm having a party this Saturday, wanna come?"

"Uh." Peter recoiled, gut rolling. "I can't."

She pouted, "Please?"

"Sorry. Saturday isn't good for me."

"He's got other plans." MJ jumped off the lowest step, landing on both feet with an unimpressed thunk against the concrete. The girl from history frowned, dragging her gaze from MJ's dusty sneakers to the badges on her thrifted denim jacket and her army-green satchel.

"With you?" The girl – Sarah, Peter remembered – let loose a laugh like a bell tinkling above a shop door, but… twisted somehow, a sharp twist that curdled the noise from something soothing to something unpleasant.

Judgemental.

Peter narrowed his eyes, "Yeah, with her." Sarah's expression slackened. "Let's go guys, I'm late."

Anger sizzling at his nerve-endings, Peter pushed off Ned's shoulder, leaving vehement whispers behind. They shoved through the remainder of the crowd nestled at the bottom of the steps. As they were about to come into open space, unincumbered by nosy classmates, Peter's eyes caught a glimpse of polished loafers, the kind that had kicked the back of his seat for years, and a scowl carved into the lines of moisturised skin.

He barely raised an eyebrow at Flash now.

They burst out of the crowd, the rows of cars rushed up before him, and Peter saw –

“Kid!” Tony called, pocketing his phone and waving an arm, “There you are!”

Relief detonated in Peter’s chest, and the buzzing beneath his skin began to subside. Any miniscule worries he might have suppressed over the weekend – whether it would be as easy today with Tony as it had by the end of Friday, whether there would be an awkward period – floated away. It felt as if a stone that had been steadily sinking his stomach finally reached the bottom, settling with sweet finality, weightless in the face of Tony’s company.

“Tony, what are you doing here?” Peter hustled towards the genius, his steps quick, ready to leave Midtown behind for sixteen blissful hours. “Where’s Happy?”

“What, you prefer Happy?” Tony mock gasped. “Et tu, brute?”

“That’s not what I meant.” Peter skid to a stop, limbs suddenly feeling light and springy, lacking in their previous tension. “But Happy would usually pick me up after school for a lab day, so I kind of assumed. Don’t you have meetings or something more important to do?”

Tony’s eyes softened, “*You’re* important, Peter.” Peter’s face flushed, but he couldn’t keep the smile from his face. “Now, on a scale from Vision when he attempts to cook, to that time Clint ripped his pants during a mission and wasn’t wearing underwear, how embarrassed would you be giving me a hug in front of all these people?”

Peter hugged him.

Tony pulled him close, and Peter exhaled a deep breath as soon as his chin was tucked against Tony’s jacket. They both ignored the rise in noise and voices and gasps and chokes of surprise and the unmistakable shout of “*holy fucking shit”* that sounded behind Peter’s back.

“Hey kid.”

“Hi.” Peter whispered groggily, “It’s been a long day.”

Tony’s grip tightened, mouth pressed tight enough against Peter’s hair that he could feel when the genius frowned, “You okay?”

“I’m looking forward to lab time.”

“You got it.” Tony drew back, repositioning an arm so it slung around Peter’s shoulder, a grounding weight that Peter leant further into. The crowd still hummed behind him, but the sensation of danger had all but disappeared beneath the smell of Tony’s cologne, and the constant, underlying hint of motor-oil and machinery that defined the engineer’s scent. “Hey, these your friends?”

Peter stretched up on the tips of his toes, motioning Ned and MJ closer, beaming immediately, “Yeah! This is Ned and this is MJ. Ned’s my guy in the chair and MJ is…” He stopped. MJ cocked her head, her expression unreadable bar one slanted brow. Peter blushed. “She’s awesome.”

“I like awesome.” Tony said dryly. He shook hands with Ned, whose mouth hung open, then with MJ, who greeted him politely and with perfect enunciation. Peter thought he might have heard an outburst of profanity from Flash’s prior direction. He didn’t look. “Nice you to meet you guys. Either of you need a lift? I’m taking Peter back to the Tower, but we can stop and drop you home or something.”

Ned squeaked, mouth moving too quick. “If that’s okay Mr Ironman Tony Stark Sir.”

Tony stared, then exaggeratingly nudged Peter in the side, “My god.” He whispered, as if terrified, “There’s two of you.”

Peter rolled his eyes in warm exasperation, “Ned lives like ten minutes from me, is that okay?”

“Sure thing. How about you MJ?”

“MJ lives close too.” Peter piped up, giving her an encouraging look.

“I have a shift actually.” MJ pulled the clasp of her satchel a little to the side, showing hints of a mint green uniform. “Thanks though.”

“Where do you work?” Tony asked, eyeing the mint green linen monstrosity like it had personally offended him.

“A donut shop, Mr Stark. It’s… nothing fancy.” It was the closest Peter had ever heard MJ to… self-conscious? Unsure? Far more so than when she stood up and asked Pepper Potts, her idol, what it was like to be one of a small percentage of female CEOs in charge of a Fortune Five Hundred company.

The notion of her feeling either was incomprehensible.

Tony didn’t blink. “Far from here?”

“Twenty-five minutes on the bus.”

“Pfft, we’ll half that. Peter, Ned, donuts?”

“Always.”

“Um yeah okay thanks Mr Iron Stark Sir –”

“Ned, seriously,” Tony held up a hand with a wince, and Ned stilled. “Just Tony is fine.”

All the colour in Ned’s face drained away, as surely as someone had pulled the plug on his soul.

“Okay Tony.” He whispered breathily.

Tony snorted, squinting up at the school.

Ned took the opportunity to mouth several curses words at Peter.

Peter's lips pulled between his teeth, desperately suppressing the urge to break into laughter. It may not have been funny coming from the flocks of student-strangers on the steps, but it felt a hell of a lot better coming from Ned.

Tony snapped his attention back to the group of teenagers and promptly, in showman fashion, twisted one arm – the one that did not hold Peter at his side – behind his back and popped open the car door on the passenger's side, tilting his head towards the Audi, "In we get then kiddies."

Under the watchful eye of their schoolmates (Ned would later say it was the highlight of his high school experience), the four of them piled into the Audi – as if getting into the car with a renowned superhero, tech-genius, and billionaire was something they did every day.

Glancing at the gathered students through the window as he buckled his seatbelt, Peter could not help skimming their expressions. Almost no one waited until Tony had pulled away from the curb to react. There were squeals and shouts and curses and disbelieving laughter and friends grabbing friends before Tony had the chance to turn the steering wheel.

"Peasants." MJ muttered.

Tony barked a laugh. MJ looked surprised, then quietly pleased, slipping down in the leather seat and watching as they pulled away from school, away from the chaos, and into traffic.

The final trace of tension in Peter's limbs leaked away, as the seat warmers fired up and the low belts of ACDC began to play.

"So." Tony began, a confessing-sort-of-guilt weighing down his voice, "I perhaps did not think ahead enough and consider what a big deal it would be if I came to pick you up." He spared Peter a fleeting look before returning his eyes to the road. "Clearly, I need to work on my impulse control. My mind was on doing something nice for you, but I should have thought of –"

"Don't apologise, really." Peter said, shaking his head. Tony's forehead furrowed. "People have been reacting that way since first period. Stuff about the field trip spread pretty quick."

"That why it's been a long day?"

Peter hummed. Tony's hands tightened on the steering wheel.

"But when we came out, Ned said I should just try owning it, so, I'm going to give that a go."

"Owning it huh." Tony caught Ned's eye in the rearview mirror, "I like that plan."

Ned's mouth moved, but no words came out.

"Also, it was nice."

"What's that?"

“You coming to pick me up instead of Happy.” Peter clarified, and his voice dipped into quiet admittance, though he knew his friends would hear either way. “I’m… This is really nice of you. I like it. Thanks Tony.”

Tony broke out into a wide smile, “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Tony glanced at him, eyes soft at the edges, and Peter felt warm and safe and unbearably thankful for field trips and Pepper Potts’ talent of interference and Steve Roger’s unimpeachably moral compass.

MJ cleared her throat. “Hate to interrupt your moment, but you need to turn right here, Mr Stark.”

“You got it.”

Twenty minutes later, they pulled up to the Peter Pan Donut and Pastry Shop.

Five minutes after that, Peter, Tony, and Ned waved goodbye to MJ, piling back into the car. Tony slotted a take-away cup of coffee into the holder. Ned had a box of four donuts on his lap, enough dessert to feed his loving family. Peter balanced two boxes of twelve and another of crumbling pastries – not quite enough for the whole Avengers team, not when considering Steve and Peter’s appetites, but close.

Fifteen minutes later, Ned closed the Audi door with reverent care, excitedly rambling that he would see Peter tomorrow or maybe call him tonight depending on what time he got home from the Tower but don’t worry if he couldn’t because they’d see each other –

Tony left him in the dust.

“Tony!” Peter yelped, appalled, and twisted to wave at his best friend, steadily shrinking into the distance, through the back window.

“He talks more than you do.” Tony said, equally appalled.

“*Tony*! That was so mean! He’s my best friend!”

“Tell him I accidentally stepped on the gas. I’ll make it up to him on Friday.”

Peter was yanking at the zip on his backpack, resting between his feet, trying to grab his phone and text Ned an apology. He paused, “Friday?” He questioned, a little reserved, then, assuming he had not misinterpreted, asked, “Are you going to pick us up again?”

“Sure thing. As long as that’s okay with you, and no meetings come up. I don’t have anything scheduled right now but you never know if some jackass from planet-of-the-apes is going to decide early-spring makes for prime invasion weather.”

Peter sat up slowly, until his spine was nestled against the seat. His phone, clasped in his hand, remained locked, “Tony,” He said slowly, “You don’t have to… I mean, if you’re doing

it because you think I haven't forgiven you or something, I really have. And you picking me up today was super nice, but I know you're busy and have a ton to do all the time –"

"And I can do those things, five am till three pm, and later on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and Thursdays." Tony quipped, one hand off the steering wheel to flick over the console, switching songs. "Hey, I see that frown. Don't worry about it kid. I already told Pep not to schedule any important SI meetings for Monday and Friday afternoons moving forward, at least not the ones she's trying to wrangle me into attending. That's interning time. Mentoring time." He leaned over and chucked Peter's chin as they stopped for a red light, "Our time."

There was a burning in Peter's eyes that he was desperately trying to dissuade.

"Thanks Tony." He murmured, dropping his phone between his legs. He could text Ned later.

"Stop thanking me bud. It's purely for selfish reasons."

"Gets you out of meetings?" Peter joked, coughing to maneuver around the lump his throat.

"That's a fantastic secondary effect for sure, but no." Tony pulled through the red light and smiled at Peter once he'd made the turn. "I get to spend time with my favourite teenager. Well. Favourite by default I suppose, since you're the only teenager I actually *like*. I can see MJ joining the club though. That girl has some *fire*."

Biting back on his emotions, Peter pursed his lips, "You know, I'm not sure how long I'm going to be able to handle these constant nice comments." He said hoarsely, the burning in his eyes having turned to prickles despite Tony's swift conversational turn into complimenting MJ. That had caused Peter's heart to prickle in a different way. "Can you go back to being a sarcastic asshole?"

Tony chuckled, "Sorry Roo. Apparently our talk on Friday opened a gate. Pepper even said she was proud of me."

"I am too."

Tony choked.

"Oh, now who's making the nice comments?" He said, strangled. "Maybe we can find a healthy balance between the two ideologies. Take turns. On Mondays I'm an asshole, then on Friday's you take the mantle. Deal?"

Peter leant his head back against the headrest, lips upturned, staring at his mentor, peace writhing deep into his bones.

"Yeah, that works for me." He said, turning over a few new insults and pranks in his mind.

"Good. For right now though, neither of us gets to be the asshole, because I spent the whole weekend thinking over this summer internship thing, and I have too many ideas and three department heads already on board. It's work time kid, we're brainstorming."

Chapter End Notes

Please consider leaving a review, they make my day :) If you have any twists to the field trip trope you would like to see, or other Irondad/Spiderson prompts you'd be interested to read, please include that too.

# Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry for the late update - I am leaving my current job in the next few days, and getting ready for that has been crazy! I also had one friend from abroad leaving after a visit, and another friend from abroad arrive for a visit. So much going on at once.

Anyway. I did not love this chapter and edited many times, but I wanted to show Peter communicating his emotions, the way Tony did two chapters back. Look at them all healing! Hope you enjoy :)

Just the epilogue to go!

Hours in the lab, dozens of holograms scribbled with ideas, and a multitude of emails sent to departmental and deputy-departmental heads later, followed by an ungodly amount of pizza, twenty-four donuts, and three mugful's of the sweet tea Tony made and Peter loved (though it wasn't as good when it wasn't in his arc-reactor thermos, he'd have to remember to pack that on Friday; his stomach squeezed at the thought of the box in the closet, he hadn't quite gathered the nerve to drag it out over the weekend) – the rest of the team departed for the night, and Peter and Tony settled into the couch to watch a movie.

"You know," Tony said lightly, ankles crossed on the coffee table as the flatscreen mechanically rose up from a hidden compartment in the sideboard, FRIDAY queueing up Revenge of the Sith, "Maybe you could even stay over sometimes. If you wanted."

"Seriously?"

"No pressure." Tony assured him, and Peter caught the hint of insecurity bleeding through. Their bowl of sweets had migrated to Peter's lap, and Tony reached across to choose one, possibly to occupy his hands so they did not tap anxiously elsewhere. "But – if May's working, and you don't mind getting up a little earlier the next day to drive to school on time –"

"That would be awesome!" Peter scrambled up the cushions, tipping the sweets sideways, "I'll ask May tomorrow."

A pleased and relieved expression flashed across Tony's face. He relaxed, his spine easing into the couch cushions as he added, "If it's too fast for that kind of suggestion I understand. I know Aunt May may take some convincing after everything that's happened –"

"Nope. No takebacks." Peter said quickly, his mind already rifling through copious ideas of what they could accomplish if he were able to stay through the evening. Stuffing a handful of

blue raspberry sour strips into his mouth, he garbled around them to tell Tony, “I’ll use puppy dog eyes. Aunt May never says no to them, but I can only use them super rarely otherwise their power might wear off.”

Tony ruffled his curls, chuckling, “Sounds like some superpower. Glad to hear you’re using it responsibly.”

Peter slid down into the optimal movie-watching position, chin tucking into his chest, a wriggling happiness squirming between his ribs and beneath the pleasant warmth of his sweater.

He couldn’t believe it. Staying *the night* at the Tower. It was so… familiar. The invitation weighed him down like a warm blanket on a winter night, surrounding him in the comfort of Tony’s affection, steady and reassuring.

Picturing it was oh so easy. He would wish Tony goodnight at the door of a guest bedroom, rather than the penthouse elevator. He would wake up to the smell of earth-rich coffee grinds. He would stretch, and FRIDAY’s Irish lilt would wish him good morning and tell him the time. He would open the curtains and stare out at the view over Manhattan, hardly believing his luck. And then he would pad to the kitchen and find Tony, sipping his coffee, waiting for him to rise so they could get to work.

The notion of seeing Tony first thing in the morning bounced Peter between curiousness and delirium. Was Tony grumpy in the morning? Did he have a routine? Would Pepper be around too? What time did they each start work? Did they prefer pancakes or waffles? Did Tony eat breakfast at all or was it just coffee?

He would learn, all these things that family knew about each other.

Peter prayed that May had forgiven Tony enough to allow it.

The opening soundtrack boomed, and trumpets blared, and the screen announced that a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, and Peter surrendered to the action, letting his questions fade away.

Throughout the movie, Tony shifted closer. Peter was too engrossed to register the inching movements, until Jedi Master Mace Windu was confronting Palpatine, and Peter tilted his head a little, and with slow realisation noticed the gap between their legs had narrowed considerably.

He caught Tony’s eye, gave an exaggerated glance down at the couch, and raised a brow.

“You’re hogging the sweets.” Tony grumbled.

Peter snorted. He heaved his tired body up, ungracefully shuffling along the couch until their legs were almost pressed together. The bowl balanced on the edge of Tony’s right leg and the edge of Peter’s left, dipping into the small gap between.

Only when Tony's arm snaked around his shoulders, did Peter realise what he had done. The movement had felt so instinctual he had moved without truly thinking anything of it, but as the back of his head came to rest against Tony's arm, and the warmth of Tony's body bled into his side, comprehension of his actions dawned. Peter's heart skipped a beat or two, stilling as his limbs succumbed to the thought blaring in his ears – *shit, what have I done*.

Tony didn't seem to notice, at least as far as Peter could tell. The bowl now comfortably within his reach, the billionaire was popping a bright orange candy into his mouth, his eyes fixated on the movie.

Fidgeting, exhaling through his nose, Peter stared down the screen as the memory – *that* memory, the frail one which had begged to be listened to during his time away from Tony and the Tower, waving its arms and calling his name – suddenly began knocking against his skull. A memory that tasted like late summer air and salted popcorn and machine oil, that sung like the Star Wars soundtrack and the quiet thump of someone else's heartbeat pressed against his ear.

In his distraction, and the bubbling of his senses beneath his skin, he did not catch Tony's concerned glance, until "You good bud? Need a bathroom break?"

Peter jerked when Tony spoke, having sunk deep into the recalling of certain feelings from certain evenings that should probably remain unsaid.

Shouldn't they?

Yes, he decided immediately, because otherwise things got sad and heavy and emotional again and Tony had been great but there was surely a limit to the man's tolerance for emotional conversation, giving his history and his admittance to that very fact on Friday, and Peter did not wish to wear that tolerance out.

Things were so good. He was going to stay overnight. Everything was great.

He shook his head.

"You're stiff as a board kid. You uncomfortable or something?"

Tony began to remove his arm, gaze shifting upwards as if to give FRIDAY a command.

"No!" Peter said quickly, the amplified response snapping out of him. Panic rose for a reason he could not quite explain, sharp and fast and stinging, his pulse hammering in his ears, as Tony began to move away.

The engineer froze; arm half lifted, no longer touching Peter's shoulder but hovering about an inch above.

Mortification swept through Peter. He stared down at the sweets in painful, wincing avoidance, his overreaction echoing around the penthouse as if in taunting.

"It's fine. I'm good. Sorry. Didn't mean to shout."

A hand, hesitant and tender, carded through his curls. As on Friday and even earlier that same day, the gentle pressure grounded him immediately, tempering his burst of panic down to a gentle thrum. The fight the memory had invoked seeped from his body. He sunk against Tony's side once more, feeling as though he had been injected with liquid calm, melting his limbs into tranquillity.

The sensation he had experienced earlier, wrangling his power to navigate the crowds outside of Midtown and instead finding surprising quietude lurking beside the pick-up line, returned. He was once more in the eye-of-the-storm, protected, peaceful, safe, at least for now.

He hadn't meant to shout *no* like that. It was as though his unruly subconscious had momentarily gained control of the wheel in his mind, spitting the word before they were removed, kicking and screaming and causing a ruckus, from the driver's seat.

He breathed, allowing his thoughts to slow.

The silence stretched, seconds, minutes, the movie all but ignored.

"Kid?" Tony muttered, the word rumbling with quizzical probing. Peter felt the vibration against his ribs.

Dread flared through Peter, spearing through his peace like a hunter, "Hm?"

"I need you to know…" Tony swallowed thickly. Peter could hear it. "If I do something that makes you uncomfortable, you can tell me. Or if it's something I say. I'd want to know. Nothing… nothing will change. We won't fall out again, I promise."

Peter's belly squeezed with guilt, and he tucked his chin further down into his chest. "I know."

"You do?"

"Yeah."

Tony relaxed into the sofa, one hand still carding through Peter's hair, fingertips pressing into his scalp with gentle pressure, and added quietly, "So… you wanna tell me why I can feel your heartbeat against my ribs right now?" Peter winced. *Shit.* "Because I get you may want me to, but I don't think I can ignore that. I'm half-worried you're having a panic attack and half-worried those sweets were left around by Loki and have turned you into a hummingbird."

Peter wasn't sure what to do. He didn't know how to look at Tony.

But he knew he wanted to remain close.

Slowly, trusting that Tony would welcome him, he turned fully into Tony's side, hiding his face in the soft cotton of his mentor's t-shirt. Tony embraced him without hesitation, arm and grip adjusting to allow him closer, shifting so Peter's cheek could more comfortably rest on his shoulder.

Tears welled in Peter's eyes, even though he wished they would disappear, even as he told himself he was being stupid. He had been so happy, not an hour before. Now his thoughts were puzzle pieces, his vision swimming as he tried to slot them together and make sense of the full picture. He pressed in tighter, trying to make himself smaller, sure that if he had two more seconds of warm solace he would be fine and able to move on like nothing had happened.

"Okay kid," Tony murmured, and it felt as though he were trying not to scare Peter away – as if Peter were a struggling rabbit caught in a trap, ready to fight should he not be able to flee. "I'm officially worried. Take your time but I'm going to need to know what's going on."

Peter could hear Tony's brain running diagnostics, trying to figure out what had gone wrong, trying to figure out what had set him off.

Stewing. Worrying. *Caring*.

Logic was battling a fearsome war against fear right beneath his skin, inciting every nerve and sinew in his body to pull apart and take sides. The anxiety buried deep in his gut rolled nauseating arguments up to his brain, whilst sweet, calming logic pressed against his sinuses, pricking the roof of his mouth with the scent of motor oil and expensive cologne.

Peter ran through the words they'd exchanged after the field trip, how solid and sincere the genius had been in his apology. The promises he had made both to Peter and to May. All the words Peter had not expected to hear, but knew in his gut were true.

Logic gained a foothold, and Peter inhaled a breath.

"Do you remember the first time we watched a movie together?"

He forced himself to inch backwards – just an inch – and readjusted to press his forehead into Tony's shoulder, rather than using it to lay his cheek. Tony never wavered, though Peter could hear the anticipatory spike in the engineer's heartbeat.

"Sure do." Tony seemed a little hesitant at this change in direction. The hand previously tangled in Peter's hair drifted down to stroke soothing lines up and down his spine. "I suggested we watch the Star Wars films in chronological order, and you called me a fake fan."

Peter sniffed, derision causing a momentarily lapse in the frantic pulsing in the hollow of his throat, "It ruins one of the most iconic movie reveals in history. I stand by what I said."

"And I stand by the fact that if you've already seen the films and you already *know* about the reveal – you know what. Not the point right now. Go on."

Peter twitched, unease pooling in his belly as he tiptoed closer to the point, wishing logic was as convincing a voice as doubt.

"That was, what, end of summer?"

He'd asked it like it was a question – as if he didn't remember the exact date.

September eighteenth, just a couple weeks after school had started up.

“Something like that. I think you’d just gone back to school.”

“Right.”

He tried to form a coherent explanation – he’d have even taken a single coherent sentence for the bout of silence that descended upon them, dragging out into uncomfortableness.

“Roo,” Tony said softly, and Peter tried not to shrink at the sliver of hurt beneath that single word.

*Roo.*

A shorthand of Tony’s first nickname for him. *Underoos.* It remained the one he loved the most, even if the original purpose was to tease his homemade suit. Shortening the name only made it more personal. It was incredible what only three little letters could evoke in someone, but Peter felt that name deep in his soul.

He lifted his head, feeling as though an indent had been shaped into his forehead from the bone of Tony’s collar, and the light of the penthouse rushed in. He breathed in again, a deep, filling breath of air that made his diaphragm contract and his chest expand.

Just like Tony had taught him.

He adjusted his position a third time. Each one made him feel more vulnerable than the last, but Tony didn’t rush him. He waited patiently until Peter settled, eventually tucking one leg beneath him, and letting the other bend, his knee resting beside Tony’s thigh. Tony’s little finger twitched, as if he was restraining himself from reaching out. Peter almost wished he would.

“That night, when I stayed for the movie,” Peter continued, arms slack at his sides, “I was really excited that you had invited me to stay longer. I think you knew that.”

“Oh yes, the days when you knew fewer of my faults and your hero-worship remained intact.” Tony teased, though Peter could see the tension winding through his body.

“Exactly.” Peter laughed, a little awkward, a little more relaxed, “Anyway. We put the movie on, we watched, we ate popcorn. I don’t know how much you remember, but I got kind of tired.”

Tony hummed, the noise a tiny vibration against the void of the penthouse. The noise of the TV had been dimmed. Neither of them had reached for the remote. Peter flicked his eyes to the ceiling on instinct.

He opened his mouth, meaning to go on, but the words got stuck. A sudden, paralysing fear crept along his bones. It looked a little like Flash, angular, sneering, its nose downturned in mockery and contempt, and he wondered –

Was this all an overreaction?

Would Tony think him foolish for this?

Would Tony think him silly, or childish, for letting such a thing gnaw at him for so many months?

But then a soft pressure on his knee gently pulled him back to Earth, like a kite flapping perilously in the wind, gently reeled in to rest on solid ground. Tony's brow was creased in deep concern, the pad of his little finger pressed into Peter's kneecap.

"Go on bud, it's okay."

And Peter breathed, knowing it would be.

"I got tired," He repeated, a palpable restlessness in the dead silence of the room, "I don't remember falling asleep but when I woke up, there was a blanket over me, and... I was resting on you. The lights were dimmed, the movie had continued playing but the volume had gone really low."

Tony gave a tiny nod, encouraging Peter to go on.

"I felt so embarrassed. I mean… I looked up to you *so* much, and I'd been so determined to impress you that night. I felt like I'd ruined my chances by being boring, or like, a little kid who needed naps."

Tony tried to reassure him, "You had been at school all day, and we'd been in the lab for hours. And you'd been so excited about the movie. You were bound to crash."

Peter huffed. He didn't know why, but irritation flared within him. "Not the point."

Tony flinched, guilt immediately flooding his expression, "Sorry. I didn't mean to –"

"No, no, it's just," Peter screwed his eyes shut, his voice paper thin and hollow with discomfort, "The embarrassment isn't the point. I mean, it kind of is." His next breath came out short, frustrated. "I sat there, feeling so ridiculous, like I'd ruined something, but when I moved and you looked down at me –" He opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling, willing his emotions to obey the laws of gravity and trickle down his body, away from where they were most likely to escape, "You had this look on your face."

A finger hesitantly pressed into his knee, a little harder than before.

"Nice. I mean… gentle, I guess. Fond, maybe." Peter's stomach clenched, "Like… like you cared about me more than an intern."

"Makes sense," Tony said, brows still pulled down, "Seeing as I do, in fact, care about you more than an intern."

Peter shook his head, rasping, "I didn't know that then."

"Neither did I. But I felt it."

Peter swallowed, the surety tearing through him and simultaneously healing the wound it left behind. He found the courage, somewhere behind his sternum, and came to the crux of his confession.

“It was the first time I thought you might care about me. That us spending time together wasn’t just because of Spiderman, or my powers. That it might be because of *me*, too.”

“It was Pete, I promise.” There was a desperation in Tony’s words that seeped into Peter’s conscious, and Peter understood why. He knew how his words sounded, as though he was contradicting all they had spoken of on Friday. It wasn’t true, but he didn’t know how to explain that yet. “So tonight, reminded you of that? Is that why you got upset with me?”

“I’m not upset with you.” Peter said quickly. “Thing is, I kind of put it to one side after that night. Told myself I was being stupid. But… every now and again you would do something. And I’d think back to that movie night.”

“What kind of things?”

“Like, helping me with a school project, or when you offered to build a car with me. That kind of stuff. Things have felt like more than being your intern, or being Spiderman.” He sighed, twiddling the fraying ends of his hoodie, “And then I started looking for those things, maybe, a bit more. Feeling good about them, until…”

“Until our fight.” Tony winced, “Oh Pete…”

Peter finally looked up, peeking out from beneath his drooping fringe, meeting his mentor’s sad, kicked, puppy-dog eyes, staring at him so heartbreakingly. His spine curled inward, an instinctual movement born of nervous energy, but he did not let it go far. He wanted to say this, to have it all out in the open, the way Tony had three days before.

“And then… I realised, or I guess I thought, I really *had* just been stupid, that I’d tricked myself into believing something was there but it wasn’t.”

“But it *was*, kid.”

“Yeah, but…” Peter trailed off, and Tony sighed, picking up the mantle.

“But because we weren’t talking, you thought it was all a lie. Because if I really cared about you, like you’d thought, we wouldn’t have gone two months without talking. I basically handed you all the evidence you needed to believe it was all in your head.”

Peter nodded, even though he felt terrible. Sadness and anxiety and tension coiled through his blood, congealing together until it was nothing more than a sluggish mess of mixed-up emotion, thumping through him with a temerity that betrayed its despair.

“And when we sat here, and I put my arm around you, I’m guessing you thought about that first movie night. All those conflicting emotions came back up, and *that’s* why you got upset.” Tony rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “You’ve basically been tossing like a yo-yo for

months. Do I care, do I not, here's some evidence for the positive, here's a whole lot to the negative."

"Don't know who you were talking about on Friday, you're a pro at this." Peter joked weakly.

They sat in the terrible silence, the weight of Peter's admission sinking into every crevice of the penthouse, absorbed into the couch and the coffee table and their clothes and their skin. Peter began to regret it. The tension was stifling, the room suddenly too warm.

As anxiety crawled along his skin like ants, he choked a desperate, "Can you say something, please?"

"I'm sorry." Tony's apology sounded as though it was crawling from his throat, mangled and struggling, but made without hesitation. "I'm just… I'm so sorry. I'm never going to stop being so sorry."

Tony reached for him, slowly, as so many of his affectionate gestures had been, and Peter felt another strong strum of guilt. The remorse on Tony's face was almost too much to bear, marring the creases by his eyes, and Peter was acutely aware that he had been the one to put it there.

*Shit.*

Panic climbed his limbs like a jungle gym.

He shouldn't have done this. They'd ended Friday so well. He'd spent all weekend so happy. Tony had just invited him to stay nights at the Tower. This was a terrible idea. He should have just kept it to himself, got himself together –

"I'm so glad you told me." Tony interrupted his internal self-flagellation, and Peter snapped his gaze to Tony's, the panic pausing in its ascent as if it, too, couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Thank you, for telling me. I… I hadn't realised how much you'd caught onto, even before I realised it myself. It's unforgivable the way my actions have toyed with your emotions."

"It's okay." The murmur was made on instinct, a need to dispel the tension in the air, the strain he'd caused with his confession. "I don't blame you for any of it."

Tony refuted it immediately. "It's not okay. And if – or, more likely, when – I do something that's not okay, I want you to do exactly what you have done tonight and tell me."

"I… are you sure?"

"Roo, I promise, I always want to know. Then I can change and do better. Promise me?"

*Roo.*

Relief – cold, icy relief – swept through Peter, another tidal wave he had not seen coming, but gladly let wash him away. He ungracefully unbent and uncrossed his legs. With a quick look at Tony, he shifted, as if to once again lean his weight against Tony's side. Tony's arm

practically flew outward, understanding immediately. Peter almost wept at the offer, thankful he had not ruined things beyond being offered Tony's affection, and shuffled in.

"I promise, you're never going to wonder whether I care about you again." Tony assured, his determination unmistakable as Peter relaxed. "I'm going to make it abundantly clear. You're going to be so sick of me." Peter sniffled, a wet laugh escaping. Tony stroked away the escaping tear before he could even think to reach up and do it himself. "Like I said, the floodgates are open. We're building you a car. Do you have a science project I can get involved with? When is parent-teacher conference night? Do you think May would let me come? What about decathlon practices, am I allowed into those? When's your next competition?"

"How about," Peter interrupted, and Tony shut up immediately, ready to hear and more than likely accept whatever Peter should propose. For the umpteenth time, Peter was struck by the warmth and the earnestness shining in Tony's face. Momentarily, his thoughts strayed to the skittering, radioactive spider that had bitten him, and felt unimaginable gratitude for its bite, and for everything that had followed since. "We start by finishing the movie?"

"Sure thing kid, whatever you want."

"Maybe not whatever. I'll get spoiled."

"You, spoiled?" Tony was smiling into his hair. Peter could feel his amusement, though the engineer's heart was, in spite of everything, racing beneath the soft blue light of the arc reactor. "Now that's a challenge worth my time."

Peter waved a hand, lightly smacking Tony's stomach, "Don't. Aunt May will kill you."

"I'll spoil her too." Tony said promptly. He paused, and Peter thought they would move on, until Tony added, "Not that I want you to think I'm trying to fix this with money or gifts. I'm not. That's additional. Gifts *and* better emotional regulation and transparency. In equal measure."

Something in Peter's chest gave a little twist. Perhaps it was the notion that Tony was trying *so damn hard* to do something completely unnatural to him – to be something he had never had but always wanted, to be something that had been hardwired *not* to be, and all for Peter's sake.

"Sounds good to me." Peter returned his cheek to Tony's shoulder, his heart breaking, "Tony?"

"Yeah kid?"

"I wanted to tell you."

"I'm glad you did."

"But, it's not because I don't believe everything we talked about before."

“No?” Tony tried to hide the painful hopefulness in his voice, masking it behind polite intrigue, but Peter could hear it. Could hear the way the word tilted upwards at the end, with a seeking, pleading swing. “It’s okay if you didn’t, or don’t. I plan to prove it to you many times over.”

“I believe all of it.” Peter insisted. “That you, you know, think of me that way, and want me around.”

Tony’s voice was quiet, and vulnerable, “I really did mean it Roo.”

Peter wound an arm around Tony’s waist, pressing his nose into his collarbone, “I know.”

“So…”

“I wanted to tell you, because I thought… maybe it would explain why I was so upset, about everything, about our fight and you know, us not talking for a long time.”

Tony nodded, and the friction of that movement frizzled against Peter’s curls, “That makes sense. I think us talking about it was a really good thing.”

“You do?”

“Yep, and not to brag, but I *also* think Pepper’s going to be seriously proud of both of us. I mean, look at us go.” Tony gestured between the two of them. “We’ve had two big talks in like three days. We’re *communicating*.”

Peter laughed, sitting up a touch to witness the grin on Tony’s face, “We’re great at this.”

“Hell yeah we are. We should host a conference.”

“A convention.”

“An expo!” Tony said with flourish, waving his arms, and Peter slipped down slightly, no longer held by Tony’s grip. “Stark and Parker present – How to Resolve Conflict and Communicate Effectively. A working title.”

“Yeah, it’s too long.”

“You think? We can change it later.” Tony’s expression slackened, the grin melting back into earnestness as he scanned Peter’s face, and Peter forced himself not to look away, unsure of what Tony was looking for but knowing it was important. “Thank you for telling me. It didn’t seem like an easy thing to say.”

“No, but I’m glad I did.” A shy, wriggling sensation dragged the next words from his mouth. “I’m happy we’re okay, and that we can both talk, and that… we’re family.”

Tony’s expression melted; the fond affection Peter was steadily becoming used to filling his eyes. He ducked his head towards Peter, and Peter tried not to startle when a soft, affectionate kiss was pressed into his crown, but he couldn’t stop himself from stiffening in surprise, or his hands from curling into embarrassed claws as he blushed from head to toe.

FRIDAY rewound to the scene they'd left off at, and Tony picked up the sweets from where they'd fallen to the floor. Peter watched, his breaths coming deep and easy, whooshing through his body like wind off a mountain peak. A weight had been lifted from his chest, one he would not have been able to identify before this evening, but that he knew he felt better for having released.

They sat back. Tony pulled a blanket over their laps. Peter thought he may fall asleep before they got to the end, but as he lay his head on Tony's shoulder, he found he didn't mind.

He was home, after all.

# Epilogue

Chapter Notes

It's the final chapter!! You know, this fic was originally meant to be about 10,000 words long, maybe two or three chapters. And here we are, 40,000 words and ten chapters later.

I really started to rediscover my love of writing through this fic and absolutely my love of Tony and Peter. For those who have stuck with this story (especially with the delays in posting this last chapter), and reviewed and sent kind words and encouragement, I cannot thank you enough.

I want to continue writing, and I have more time now I've left my job, so please comment with your Tony/Peter prompts! Field trip or otherwise.

Much love <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Four months later.*

“Stop fidgeting.”

“I’m not fidgeting.”

“You think I don’t know what fidgeting looks like? Seriously kid, cut it out or I’m doing the presentation by myself.”

“They’re *my* classmates!”

“They’re my interns.”

“It’s *my* project!”

“It’s my company.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Watch me pipsqueak.” Peter scowled at Tony, who only chuckled, knowing Peter hated that nickname. “You look like an angry chinchilla when you pull that face. Makes me want to pinch your cheeks and make goo-goo-gaga noises.”

Tony leaned his way with a teasing smirk, one hand raised in a pinched sort-of claw as if prepared to do just that.

Peter smacked his hand away, scowl deepening, “Stop it!” Tony dropped his hand, laughing harder as Peter avoided his impish ministrations. Peter tried not to react, but Tony’s laugh was infectious, and a grin was tugging the corners of his lips up. He groaned, “You’re so annoying.”

“You love me anyway.” Tony said in a singsong, and Peter’s stomach jerked.

“Yeah yeah.” He muttered, cheeks blooming with colour.

It was the first week of August, and stood backstage of the thirtieth-floor auditorium, Peter had never been gladder for the invention of air conditioning. Outside, he knew the city heat was sweltering – skyscraper windows reflecting the summer sun, concrete sidewalks practically melting, everyone dressed in shorts and tank tops but still glistening with sweat.

“See, all that fidgeting now your tie is askew.” Tony tutted, reaching out to lift Peter’s chin and mock-sigh at his untidiness. The next thing Peter knew, Tony’s flashcards were between the man’s teeth, and he had stepped in front of Peter.

“Ew, Tony!” Peter complained, trying to reach up and tug the cards away, “That’s disgusting! They’re going to get wet!”

“Schtop ick.” Tony mumbled around the flashcards, ducking sideways and out of Peter’s grasp, “Schtay schtill. Leck me fixsh thish.” He batted Peter’s hand away, just as Peter had done to him seconds earlier, and Peter dropped his arms to his sides, looking at the man in front of him with exasperation as Tony fiddled and fussed and helped straighten his tie.

It gave him time to really look at Tony though, just for a few moments. The engineer stood less than a pace away, his fingers dancing around Peter’s neck, shoulders and chest, not only fixing his tie but adjusting his blazer and his shirt, the attention fond and the affection easy.

Peter had been a little nervous to return to the thirtieth floor – the sight of their reconciliation four months ago, all after “the argument” six months ago – and he thought Tony felt the same. Maybe that was why his mentor was joking around so much. He’d paid attention these past months and knew Tony’s tics better than before, and humour was always top of the list.

He thought back to their conversation months ago, sat at the kitchen island in the Stark penthouse. He remembered the look on Tony’s face – his seriousness as he had voiced his apology, his plea to do better, his admission at caring for Peter. Peter had never been on the receiving end of such comments, and to be frank hadn’t known what to do with himself. He’d stared down at his own knees for most of Tony’s monologue and tried not to cry.

He'd known the whole way through of course that he was going to accept Tony’s apology. He’d felt so *stupid*, realising that Tony had never doubted him as Peter had accused, that his tracking and questions and watchful eyes weren’t because he didn’t trust Peter, but because he *cared* about Peter.

God, he had really hit himself over the head for that mistake.

That said, hearing Tony say those things aloud, had meant… well, everything, to Peter.

Strangely enough though, it had all come down to those two little words.

*Vibranium Status.*

Well, that and the conversation they'd had the following Monday, after Tony had collected him from school. Peter had finally gathered the courage to share the memory haunting him those two months they'd spent apart, helping Tony understand why the engineer's confession of care meant so very much to him, how many aspects of their relationship that terrifying truth had healed.

Perhaps it was unfair to say, but Peter had not realised at the time quite how ardently Tony would take that conversation to heart.

Ever since, with a single-mindedness that astonished even Pepper and Rhodey (who knew the genius best) Tony had thrown himself into being the most present and consistent mentor the world had ever seen. It had, according to Pepper, become the engineer's first priority.

Bar nothing, and no one.

Tony was there at the Midtown High school pick-up line, every Monday and Friday at three-thirty on the dot, to collect Peter and his friends from school. By semester's end the students barely gave him a second glance – except for that final day of school, when the students came pouring out of the doors in celebration of the long-awaited arrival of summer break, and Tony had been standing against the Audi in a floral shirt and shorts, with May, Pepper, Happy and Rhodey by his side, plane tickets held aloft, declaring he was taking them all to Hawaii to celebrate.

Tony was elbow deep in a car engine, explaining the mechanics with a zestfulness that made Peter laugh till his stomach hurt.

Tony was stood in the penthouse kitchen late into the night, eating ice cream whilst Peter sheepishly shared his plans for asking MJ on a date, wiggling his eyebrows, teasing but supportive.

Tony was halfway through explaining MIT's first-year curriculum, double and triple checking that Peter didn't need him to explain something a second time and beaming with pride when Peter could regurgitate entire theoretical premises without missing a beat.

Tony was wearing a baseball cap and a pair of sunglasses, hidden in the back of the auditorium when Peter was announced Midtown High's Science Fair champion, resisting the urge to holler at the top of his lungs.

Tony was encased in the Ironman suit, repulsors blaring, flying through the skyline of Queens whilst Peter swung on his webs, having joined him for a patrol.

Tony was pouting – *pouting* – at May when she said no, he couldn't come to Peter's end-of-year parent-teacher conference, did he have any idea how that would look to the other teachers and the parents and the media?

Tony was boneless on the couch, his arm around Peter's shoulder as they settled in for their fortnightly movie, arguing over whether popcorn was better with or without butter, sweet or salted, and only getting up when it was, as he said, time for a certain spiderling to get some rest.

Tony was hugging Peter at the door of what was now known as *Peter's* bedroom, ruffling his curls, promising to make them pancakes come the morning, wishing him a good night's sleep.

He had rearranged trips when they coincided with Peter's school events. He had turned down meetings with hot-shot tech experts when they could only meet on a Monday afternoon. He'd damn near lost his mind when other members of the Avengers had taken Peter on a high-risk mission without his knowledge.

"*If you ever pull this shit again,*" He'd thundered, as Sam and Clint steadily backed away, "*You will never see my kid again. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"*

It had felt a little exhaustive to begin with, though Peter felt guilt for even thinking such a thing - overwhelming in a way that had made his senses hum with unreleased energy, skittering beneath his skin like spiders searching for the safety of a shadow. And then Tony would be a few minutes late, or he wouldn't answer a text for a few hours, and something sour in Peter's chest would spike, sticking like thorns, choking him with their all-too familiar shape.

But Tony was committed, he never wavered, not even once, and as the months slipped by Peter came to know Tony's love with a certainty he could have argued in front of the Supreme Court (and was almost required to, but that was a story for another time).

"You with me kid?"

Peter snapped to attention, Tony's furrowed brows swimming in his line of sight. He cleared his throat, rolling back his shoulders as he registered the murmuring voices beyond the curtain separating them from the stage, "I'm good."

Picking a non-existent piece of lint off Peter's shoulder with his cue cards (mercifully removed from between his teeth), Tony's brow line softened, "Hey, you nervous? It's okay to be nervous."

"I'm not nervous."

"Tell that to the twitch in your eye."

"I'm not!" Peter laughed. The noise must have been convincing, because the trepidation etched beside Tony's eyes dissolved, replaced with the creases of a smile. "Actually… I was just thinking about the last time we were here, you know, and everything that's happened since."

Tony hummed with understanding, but Peter didn't need super-senses to register the tensing of the engineer's frame, the subtle wince that ran along his jaw, the slight spasm of his

forefinger.

“Oh yeah? Anything you want to share with the boss?”

Peter huffed a chuckle, “You’re not my boss.”

“Huh. That’s weird. Must have been some other teenager hanging from my ceiling the other night, spouting last-minute ideas to improve Stark Industries long-term sustainability in Asia.”

“You’re my *mentor*.”

“Oh, right, and is that all?”

Tony playfully bumped their shoulders together, and heat rose in Peter’s cheeks.

“Maybe.”

Tony gasped, spinning to lean against the wall beside the teen, clutching at his heart with enough dramatic flair to energise a Broadway cast of Les Misérables. “*Hurtful*.”

Peter smiled, quietly, “Untrue.”

“What was that? Say that again?” Tony shoved his ear towards Peter’s face, tapping on the lobe as laughter once more bubbled past Peter’s lips. He was pushing Tony away with only a miniscule amount of his strength, lest the older man careened onto the stage and hit the deck. “Something about you telling a *lie*, was it?”

“You’re insufferable.”

“I’m your favourite.”

“Out of who and how many? Cause if Pepper’s an option –”

“Jesus kid.” Tony huffed, planting his back against the wall once more so they stood shoulder-to-shoulder. “You really know how to deflate my ego.”

“I’ve been told it’s a teenager’s speciality.”

“Something you’ll grow out of then, given time. Thank goodness.”

“Then again –”

“Alright, alright,” Tony grumbled, and Peter aimed a smirk at his shoes, scuffing at the linoleum floors until they squeaked. “Seriously though. You okay?” Raising his head, Peter’s chest warmed at the concern lingering behind Tony’s eyes, the shifting of his gaze as it passed over Peter in careful inspection, “Being here, thinking about everything? Is it… raising anything? We can talk. The presentation can wait.”

Peter raised a brow, senses latching on to the steadily increasing number of shuffling bodies beyond the curtain, the lilt of New York accents, the nervous energy filtering through the room.

“It really can’t, Tony.”

“If you need it, then yeah, it really can.”

And Peter knew – knew that Tony would call off the whole damn thing if Peter decided he couldn’t do this. All Peter needed to do was say the word.

“I was just thinking,” Peter began, the warmth spreading through his chest as Tony’s eyes latched on his, serious and attentive and ready to hear whatever he wanted to say, “How grateful I am for that field trip.”

Tony’s concern crumpled, his expression blooming into tender, all-encompassing fondness, “Me too kiddo.” He murmured, reaching out to tuck Peter beneath his arm. Peter went willingly – he always did – tilting to rest his head on the bony edge of Tony’s shoulder.

They stood there in the low light, warm and present. Peter let his eyes flutter shut and focused in on Tony’s breathing, the rise and fall of the body beneath his temple, the softness of the vicuna suit against his skin, the low rustle of shifting fabric, the cool, ventilated air whistling through the space, amplifying the calming scent of motor oil and…

“Tony.”

“Roo.”

“Did you steal another one of my tic-tacs?”

Tony froze, “… No?”

“Tony!”

“They were right there,” Tony protested, as Peter shoved him away with an annoyance bordering on vengeful, “And I had tuna for lunch so really it was a public service. How the hell did you –”

“I can smell them on you!”

Tony groaned, regaining his footing and slapping a hand against his forehead, “Damn your spidey-senses.”

“Stop stealing my tic-tacs.”

“Stop leaving them in the lab then.”

“They’re for –”

“Your dates with MJ?” Tony wiggled his eyebrows, and Peter looked around for something to throw at him. “Okay, okay. I’ll stop stealing them. Probably. If I can. Probably not. Hey I supply the popcorn on movie nights so honestly, I think the tic tacs are fair game.”

Gaze catching on a stray wire, bound and tangled on the floor, Peter barely had time to enjoy the imagined satisfaction of lobbing it at Tony’s head when the *ding* of the elevator and the click of stilettos sounded, interrupting.

He glared at Tony, “This is not over.”

Tony grinned, throwing an arm around his shoulders, and Peter let his displeasure pass, turning his attention to the approaching figure.

“You ready boys?” Pepper strode towards them, heels snapping against the floor, cutting a stern figure in a fitting black dress and a long grey jacket, her eight-caret engagement ring managing to sparkle even in the dimmest of lighting.

Peter perked up immediately, “Yes Miss Potts CEO ma’am!”

Pepper gave him an affectionate but exasperated look, “I know you’re joking Peter, but that’s a bit much even for you.”

“We’ve got this Pep.” Tony stepped away from Peter to kiss his fiancé’s cheek. Pepper rolled her eyes, laying a hand on his shoulder, reaching for his cue cards as if to check if that was true. Tony thrust them out of her reach. “Pep. Seriously. We’ve practised a hundred times. The kid’s going to be amazing.”

Peter grinned sheepishly as Pepper looked him over.

“Now that I know.” She said warmly, and Peter could not help the blush that rose up, cheeks flaming red at the faith they each showed in him. “In that case, shall we get this show on the road?”

Peter looked at Tony.

Tony looked at Peter.

Peter looked over his shoulder, towards the stage, biting the inside of his cheek. His heart was a sudden, tangled mess of flesh and veins and pumping blood, skipping a few beats as his senses reached out into the hidden crowd and searched for the tones and tenors he recognised.

“Ready kid?” Tony asked gently, chucking Peter’s chin with his fist to regain his attention.

Peter pursed his lips and pushed out a long, shaking exhale. “Ready.”

Pepper and Tony looked at each other, and Tony gave a miniscule nod, the barest dipping ascent of his chin. Pepper searched his face, eyes roaming, and the hand laden down with that sparkling diamond strayed upwards to brush the stubble on Tony’s chin.

Not for the first time, Peter wondered what it would be like to love someone as entirely as he knew Tony and Pepper loved each other.

He looked away as they shared that moment, averting his gaze to the ropes and lights and the curtains that made up the back of stage, and then Pepper was moving past them, squeezing his shoulder and whispering, “You’ve got this kiddo”, on her way.

An assistant appeared as if from nowhere, materialising between the curtains, handing her a microphone. Tony stepped forward, his arm once more winding over Peter’s shoulder as they watched Pepper straighten her spine, rise to her full height, and stride out under the lights of the stage, her voice ringing out amongst the sounding cheers, “Good morning, Midtown High, and welcome to Stark Industries!”

“She’s so cool.” Peter said wistfully.

“Don’t have to tell me twice.” Tony agreed. He tapped Peter’s bicep. “Let’s get in position kid.”

They shuffled forward, coming to the edge of the stage’s exit-left, from whence Peter had, not so many months ago, watched Pepper and the Avengers and eventually Tony appear one by one, all whilst Peter had fought to keep down his lunch.

Stifling a smile, Peter remembered the feeling of his stomach hitting the floor between his feet.

Tony did not miss his glee. “What’s that grin for Underoos?”

Curls flying, Peter shook his head a little. Amusement writhed in his chest. He fought to keep it down, but it was threatening to burst, and his lips kept ticking upwards. “Nothing.” He snickered. “Just remembering how much I was shitting myself, watching Pepper and the team walk out of here.”

“Language. I’ll tell Capsicle on you.” But Tony chuckled too.

“Seems so ridiculous now.”

“A lot of shit does, with hindsight.”

“Language. I’ll tell Capsicle on you.”

“Tell on me and tic-tacs will be the least of your worries.”

As Peter fought to keep his giggle under his breath, Tony peaked around the curtain, though not so far either of them would be seen, his side pressing against Peter’s to spy on Pepper.

“We are so glad you all accepted our invitation to join us,” The CEO was saying, “On our very first year of the Stark Industries summer internship programme for high school students!”

Another great cheer rose up.

“Number of interns?” Tony asked quietly, gaze still fixated on Pepper.

“Thirty.” Peter answered with ease, watching in awe as Pepper owned that stage like it was *nothing*. Just another Monday. “Mostly soon-to-be juniors and seniors, but there’s a couple of sophomores and two sprightly freshmen for good measure.”

“Number of departments involved?”

“Fourteen.”

“Biggest intern group?”

“Engineering’s got four, research and development have three. Every other department has one or two.”

“Basic requirements?”

“Follow the rules, listen to your supervisors, don’t touch shit without permission, stay within your discipline. You’ve got three weeks so learn as much as you can and have a damn good time.”

Tony shifted to face him, raising a brow, “That last one’s new.”

Peter shrugged, “Thought it was fitting.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” Peter bumped his shoulder, ever so lightly, against the billionaire’s, “After all, I have the best time whenever *I’m* here. But…”

Tony’s eyes narrowed, two slits practically blotted out in the shadowy space, a smirk stretching steadily across his lips, “But?”

Peter heaved a sigh, the exasperation in his tone betraying faux irritation and suffering. He made Tony wait for his answer as Pepper’s assistant re-materialized between the shifting black curtains and they each accepted a microphone, acquainting themselves with the controls.

“But,” Peter continued, twisting the microphone in his hand and refusing to meet the eyes boring holes in the side of his head, “That might have something to do with my mentor.”

Tony’s smirk grew into a full-blown grin, “You think?”

“Yep.”

Peter pressed his lips together to hold back his mirth. Joy and gratitude and pure fucking *happiness* was writhing through his body. Down his veins and through his limbs, along the same patched-up fissures where rejection and hurt had once splintered him into a thousand pieces –

Love now sung.

“And what’s he like? This mentor of yours?” Tony asked with a scoff, trying to act casual and failing miserably, peering out to the stage once more where Pepper was now wrapping up her introduction.

Peter waited until Tony drew back to turn and meet his eye. When he did, he smiled.

“He’s my favourite.”

Tony sucked in a breath, quick, involuntary, surprised.

“Out of whoever, and however many.” Peter added softly.

Under the dim of the lights, tucked away as if there was no one else on this planet but the two of them, Tony’s expression collapsed, emotion flooding his face. His bottom lip pushed out, quivering a little and twisting at the edge, all pretence of joking and teasing done away with as he whispered, “Really?”

“Don’t think you’ll get me to say it twice.”

“Trust me kid, once is enough.” Tony’s arms wrapped around him, and the darkness of the backstage was swallowed up by the soft blackness of the engineer’s suit. Tucking his head against Tony’s collarbone, the place he knew he was safest in this world, Peter let the rest of the world fall away. Tony’s breath brushed his ear as the engineer pressed a kiss against his hair, “I love you Roo.”

Peter’s heart trembled under the weight of his gratitude.

“I love you too.” He murmured, and Tony’s arms squeezed around him.

He couldn’t believe how damn lucky he was.

When they pulled back, Tony stared at his with such affection that tears gathered at Peter’s waterline. Tony swiftly swiped them away, inhaling a deep breath as if he was trying to stave off his own. “Deep breath kiddo, I think it’s almost our turn.”

Nodding, Peter aimed his gaze at the ceiling, shaking some of the emotion from his body.

He didn’t regret it one bit, saying what he’d said, or that he’d chosen now to say it.

He’d promised himself that he would always tell Tony the truth.

And his next truth… the bubbling feeling between his bones that whispered Tony was far more than a mentor to him, more than an unspecified family member who argued with him over the better kind of popcorn….

The truth that, Tony saying so often that he was proud of Peter had begun to feel like the memory of Richard Parker’s smile, and the loud, distant, beautiful laughter of Uncle Ben….

Well, Peter would share that in due course. When he was ready.

Staring up at Tony now, microphone grasped in his hand, breath shuddering between his lips, motor oil invading his senses, Peter almost felt ready.

“Midtown High please welcome the owner of Stark Industries, Tony Stark, and his incredible intern and Midtown’s own, Peter Parker!”

The lights were blinding. The students were roaring. Pepper was clapping. The department heads were scribbling notes. Peter was speaking. Tony was beaming. Ned was in the audience, a booklet on the coding department resting in his lap. Steve and Rhodey were hollering praise from the back row, making their support known.

And the screen behind them read, “The Parker Initiative; the Stark Industries Summer Internship Programme for High School Students”.

When they came off the stage, thunderous applause at their backs, each intern now paired with their supervisor, sweat dribbling from their foreheads as they returned to the cool and the dark, Tony wrapped him up in a hug so tight Peter was lifted off the floor, “You were amazing. I knew you would be. I’m so damn proud of you kid.”

And Peter was ready.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading Vibranium Status!

Please comment with your Tony/Peter Irondad/Spiderson fic prompts, and in the meantime consider checking out my other fics <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!